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Gestapo terrorised Europe

Hitler's secret henchmen

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WWII's darkest crimes

This photo shows the moment when female slave labourers were rescued by British forces in Osnabrück, Germany. Just minutes before, the women had been lined up for execution by the Nazis who were desperate to eliminate all traces of their crimes.

Acts of terror against civilians, summary executions and forced labour were commonplace in German-occupied territories, but other nations were equally guilty of crimes against both prisoners of war and ordinary citizens. In concentration camps, mass murder became an industrial process, but an arguably worse fate awaited those chosen for medical experiments.

This issue reveals not just the ordinary brutality of war, but what can happen when political regimes begin purging humans they have labelled as 'undesirable'. It's uncomfortable but compelling reading and covers those events we should never forget.

Allied bombs destroyed power plants and weapons factories, but the pilots also dropped shells on residential neighbourhoods.

1940-45



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FACT

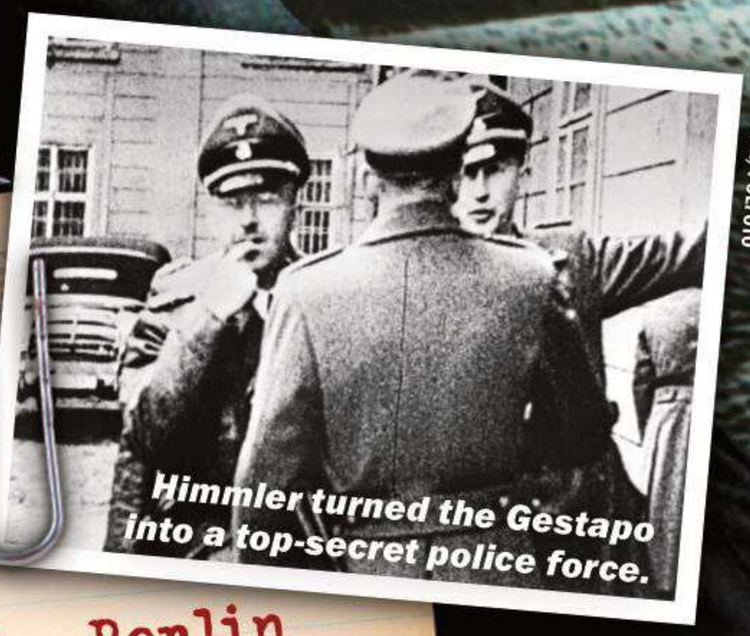
Name: Geheime Staatspolizei

Created: 26th April 1933

Boss: Hermann Göring (1933-34)
Heinrich Himmler (1934-45)

Headquarters: Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, Berlin

Employees: 32,000 (1944)



Himmler turned the Gestapo into a top-secret police force.

GRANGER/POLFOTO

GESTAPO

HITLER'S SECRET HENCHMEN

Deportations, torture and arbitrary executions. Germany's secret state police – the Gestapo – spread horror in all the occupied countries of Europe. Using local informants, they infiltrated Resistance groups and showed no mercy to enemies of the Third Reich.

BY CLAUS CANCEL

At first, he didn't notice anything unusual about the four or five German trucks as they thundered in a cloud of fumes through the small, sleepy village. Then, an unfamiliar sound made the French police officer, Leon Roussel, look again.

Through the engine noise, he heard strains of the French national anthem, 'La Marseillaise', and saw, in the back of the open trucks ordinary Frenchmen guarded by Germans.

"Several civilians with handcuffs were in the trucks and were singing patriotic songs", Roussel recalled in his testimony after the war. They returned a few hours later. This time "the trucks were covered and no noise could be heard, but a trickle of blood escaped from them and left a trail on the road". Roussel later learned that all the civilians had been shot.

Bloody reprisals

On 20th October 1941, two days before Roussel saw the trucks in Châteaubriant, a German colonel had been killed by the Resistance. In reprisal, the Germans executed 50 French civilians. These were the men Roussel had seen.

The Gestapo, Nazi Germany's secret state police, were behind the move. And the mass execution at Châteaubriant was not an isolated incident: by the end of World War II, in France alone, the ruthlessly efficient Gestapo had killed more than 29,600 civilians and sent 75,000 of France's Jewish population to death camps elsewhere in Europe.

Members of the Gestapo could kill anyone, anywhere. They were answerable only to the chief of German police, SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, and his faithful right-hand man, SS-Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich. Officially, only Adolf Hitler, Germany's undisputed dictator, ranked above them, and he was extremely pleased with the Gestapo's results.

Five years before the executions in Châteaubriant, in 1936, Hitler unified Germany's police forces and placed them under Himmler's control, effectively merging them all into the country's secret state police. As a result, the Gestapo was now above the law and able to detain, imprison, torture, deport or even kill without observing any legal niceties, such as due process, warrants or trials.

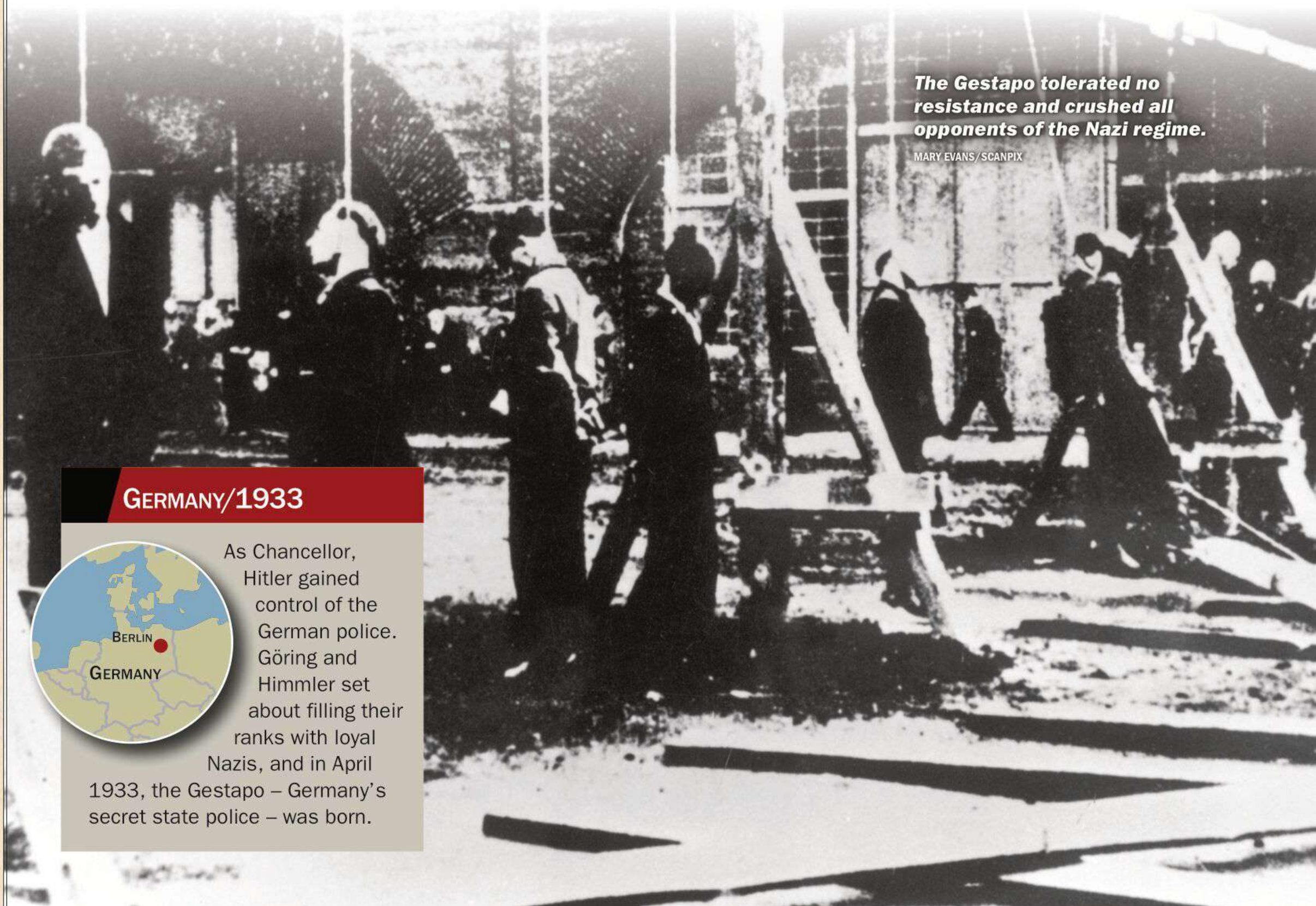
Commenting on the Gestapo's role as Hitler's henchmen in 1941, Himmler said, "It is natural that people do not want to be involved with us too much. There is no problem down to the smallest egotistical longing which the Gestapo cannot solve. Regarded in this way we are, if a joke is permitted, looked upon as a cross between a general maid and the dustbin of the Reich".

The wide powers meant that the Gestapo operated outside the court system. A suspect could be picked up by the Gestapo, even if he had already been declared innocent by a German court or released following imprisonment.

An arrest by the Gestapo usually resulted in death or deportation to a concentration camp without any charges.

Crackdown on enemies of the state

The Gestapo was founded in 1933 when Hitler appointed his deputy, Hermann Göring, as the interior minister of Prussia and thus, the chief of Prussia's police. Göring's first



The Gestapo tolerated no resistance and crushed all opponents of the Nazi regime.

MARY EVANS/SCANPIX

GERMANY/1933

As Chancellor, Hitler gained control of the German police. Göring and Himmler set about filling their ranks with loyal Nazis, and in April 1933, the Gestapo – Germany's secret state police – was born.

move was to fill the police ranks with committed Nazis. The goal was to create a top-secret police force that operated in the shadows and crushed anyone or anything that could be deemed detrimental to the state. However, the following year Göring had to hand over control of the Gestapo to Himmler. By then, Himmler was the chief of police in Munich, and under his leadership, the Gestapo went from a Prussian police unit to become Germany's secret state police.

The Gestapo found its final form in 1939 when the secret police were organised under the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) – the German Reich's official security service – which was led by Himmler's infamous helpmate, Reinhard Heydrich. The RSHA did not only include the Gestapo, though. The organisation also contained the notorious death squads, the Einsatzgruppen, with which the Gestapo actively collaborated in Eastern Europe.

Gestapo agents moved into the occupied territories in the wake of the German army, assisting the Einsatzgruppen and their local equivalents in rounding up, executing and organising mass burial pits for Jews, Romanies, resistance fighters, disabled people and anyone else unfortunate enough to attract their attention. Those who weren't

gestapo's torture methods

HAND CRUSHER This was a small vice in which a prisoner's hand was placed. When the interrogator turned the handle, the bones in the hand were slowly crushed.



Cold-hearted trio led the Gestapo

Himmler's, Heydrich's and Müller's bloodily brutal secret police force was every opponent's worst nightmare.

FACT

THE GESTAPO BOSS COMMITTED SUICIDE

Name: Heinrich Himmler
Position: Head of the SS

Himmler joined the Nazi Party in 1923 and became one of Hitler's inner circle. He eventually became both minister of the interior and the head of the SS. Towards the end of the war, he tried to broker a peace with the Allies. Hitler stripped him of his rank as a result. After Germany surrendered, Himmler was arrested, but committed suicide with a cyanide capsule.

FACT

RSHA BOSS DIED AFTER ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

Name: Reinhard Heydrich
Position: Head of the RSHA

Heydrich rose through the SS ranks at lightning speed. Together with Himmler, he was responsible for the administration of the RSHA, an umbrella organisation for the security police. In May 1942, Heydrich was injured during an assassination attempt in Czechoslovakia when his car was hit by a converted anti-tank mine. He died of his wounds a week later.

FACT

SOME CLAIM MÜLLER FLED TO SOUTH AMERICA

Name: Heinrich Müller
Position: Head of the Gestapo

After receiving several awards for bravery during World War I, Müller joined the Prussian police force in 1919. Twenty years later he was the head of the Gestapo. He also helped plan and execute the Holocaust. Müller was last seen in Hitler's bunker the day after the Führer's suicide. Müller's corpse was never found, and some believe he fled to South America.

Gestapo uniform was a Hollywood fiction

In real life, Gestapo agents wore civilian clothes. The famous black leather coats were invented for the movies.



Fiction

Gestapo agents are often seen wearing black leather coats in movies, but in reality, the Gestapo was a secret police force and a uniform that attracted attention would be counterproductive. Most of the time, the Gestapo wore civilian clothing, although they sometimes wore a grey SS uniform for operations in German–occupied territories.

The myth of the black coats probably dates from The Night of the Long Knives in 1934, when the Gestapo killed all those deemed to be a threat to Nazi power. Among the victims was a former chancellor who was murdered by three men who happened to be wearing black coats.

Gestapo commanders – including Himmler and Heydrich – also played their part by appearing in black leather coats, which were part of their SS uniform.



Fact

The Gestapo usually dressed in civilian clothing to avoid attracting attention.



INTERFOTO/POLFOTO



Service pistol
The Gestapo's standard handgun was the semi–automatic CZ vz 27 pistol. It was made in Prague especially for the Germans.

Police badge
Gestapo agents could identify themselves if necessary by showing a badge with their service number.

AKG/SCANPIX

killed instantly were deported in their thousands to concentration camps.

While the Gestapo's methods were overtly cruel in the East, it was more circumspect though no less barbaric in the West, where it relied on Nazi collaborators to infiltrate Resistance groups. These renegades were often bribed.

After the war, Danish informant Grethe Bartram explained how she became involved:

"One day I happened to see in an Aarhus newspaper an advertisement posted by the Danish police. They were offering a bounty of 1,000 Danish kroner to anyone who could provide information about an arson attack on a nearby tailor's shop. I knew something about the matter. I only thought of one thing: what clothes and food could I buy for my child and me if I had DKK 1,000?"

The advertisement had been placed by the Gestapo, and Bartram, who had links to the communist resistance movement, became one of Denmark's most notorious informants. She betrayed more than 50 people to the Gestapo during the war, including her own brother and husband.



... and Hitler immediately ordered 10,000 people to be rounded up and executed in revenge.

GRANGER/POLFOTO

In May 1942, Czech agents attacked Heydrich's car with a converted mine. The senior SS commander lost his life...

TOPFOTO/POLFOTO

Hung by their arms

When the Gestapo was given a name, the suspect was typically picked up at his or her home by two or three Gestapo agents and a unit of SS soldiers. The suspect was given a few minutes to pack some clothes and was then taken away without a word.

Prisoners who were designated as enemies of the Third Reich all received the same treatment – whether that was

gestapo's torture methods

A TRUTH SERUM based on the drug scopolamine was used to make prisoners delirious. Allegedly, this would make them lose all sense of reality and to honestly answer any and all questions put to them.

in the Gestapo cells in the Shell House in Copenhagen, Victoria Terrace in Oslo or in the Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in Berlin. In general, the suspect was initially left in a dark, louse-ridden cell. The interrogation and torture only began after a week or more. Often this consisted of the prisoner being beaten with sticks, knotted ropes or fists. But there was also widespread use of more 'advanced' methods of torture. For example, Gestapo interrogators liked to handcuff prisoners' hands behind their backs and then hang them by their arms. Prisoners were allowed to hang like this in the Gestapo's basement torture cells until they either passed out or their shoulders dislocated.

Other even more sadistic methods of torture were also practiced. For example, prisoners would be forced to walk on salt after having the balls of their feet sliced with razor blades. Gestapo agents would also put cotton swabs dipped in kerosene between prisoners' toes and fingers and light them.

Water torture, where a person's head was held underwater, was also used extensively by the Gestapo's torturers. Electric shocks also formed part of their agents' repertoire with one electrode usually being attached to the ankle and the other to the genitals.

Local agents were the most brutal

Torture was usually performed by local Gestapo agents who knew the language and the culture. These local men were often more feared than the Germans because they could more easily break the prisoners psychologically and used more brutal techniques to impress their German employers. The Norwegian Henry Rinnan and the Dane Ib Birkedal were two examples of this sadistic breed, both of whom were extremely callous and highly effective.

One of the prisoners tortured by Birkedal was the leading resistance agent Mogens Fog. He was interrogated at Gestapo's headquarters in Copenhagen in 1944 but refused to reveal the names of his fellow operatives. The Germans grew tired of the stubborn Fog and informed him that they felt compelled to use 'other methods'. Fog was brought to Birkedal at 03.00 in the morning.

"He had a stick in his hand, old and gnarled, and sometimes he held it up under his nose and sniffed at it, obviously an ingrained habit, " Fog wrote about Birkedal after the war.

Birkedal raged and cursed in alternate Danish and German, threatening Fog that he "might soon have to look around for his thumb screws".

He claimed that if Fog didn't start talking soon, not only would he beat him with the stick, but that the Germans would blow-up various occupied buildings in Copenhagen and lay the blame on Fog. When that didn't loosen Fog's tongue, Birkedal forced him across the back of a chair and began striking him with the gnarled stick.

"Every stroke hurt more and more, especially just after the blow had landed. Gradually, [Birkedal] began to strike the same place over and over again, all the time asking, 'Well? Well?' Even the lightest touch was severely painful."

Fog survived the Gestapo's torture without permanent physical injury, but others were less fortunate. For example, after the war, the French officer and schoolteacher Louis Labussière described the Gestapo methods of torture at the Nuremberg trials. He described how his comrade Lalbue had been tortured by the Gestapo while in France:

"He was unable to move the fingers of his right hand as a result of the hanging. He had been subjected

Local torturers did Gestapo's dirty work

FACT

DENMARK'S MOST-FEARED AGENT



Name: Ib Birkedal
Former occupation: Sailor

Birkedal was hired as an interpreter, but soon earned a reputation as the most-feared torturer in Denmark. He led a group of Danish collaborators who tracked down and killed opponents of the Third Reich.

Birkedal fled to Germany after the war but was later arrested and tried. He was the last man in Denmark to be executed by firing squad.

FACT

MURDERED 13



Name: Henry Rinnan
Former occupation: Driver

As the leader of the infamous Gestapo unit Rinnanbanden, Henry Rinnan infiltrated hundreds of Norwegian Resistance groups and brought about thousands of arrests. Rinnan was a cold-blooded torturer who even inflicted punishment on himself. His unit carried out over 80 killings, and Rinnan himself was personally convicted of 13 murders. He was executed by firing squad in February 1947.

FACT

TOO MUCH FOR THE GESTAPO



Name: Pierre Paoli
Former occupation: Clerk

Paoli was a fiery anti-communist who chose to serve the Nazis. First as a courier in Paris, then later as a torturer in Bourges. His methods were so brutal that sometimes German Gestapo agents intervened. After Germany surrendered, he was captured at the Danish border and tried for his crimes. He was executed on the morning of 15th June 1946.

FACT

INFILTRATED LOCAL RESISTANCE



Name: Anton van der Waals
Former occupation: Mechanic

Van der Waals infiltrated several Dutch Resistance groups and helped the Gestapo intercept their radio transmissions. This enabled the Germans to strike whenever the groups received weapons from Britain. Eventually, he became too well-known for the Gestapo to continue using him. After the war, he was sentenced to death for the role he played in 34 Gestapo executions.

British bombers killed 86 children

One of the biggest attacks against the Gestapo took place on 21st March 1945 when 18 British Mosquito aircraft bombed the Gestapo's Danish headquarters. The action took place at the behest of local resistance forces, who hoped that the attack would free detainees and destroy the Gestapo's records about local resistance operations.

The attack destroyed the headquarters and killed more than 100 agents and soldiers. However, one of the planes crashed near a Catholic girl's school, which resulted in several British pilots mistakenly believing that the school was their target. This fatal mistake took the lives of 86 schoolchildren.



The British bombing raid levelled the Gestapo's Danish headquarters.

SCANPIX

to flogging and electricity. Sharp-pointed matches had been driven under the nails of his hands and feet. His wrists and ankles had been wrapped with rolls of wadding and the matches had been set on fire. While they were burning, a German plunged a pointed knife into the soles of his feet several times and another lashed him with a whip. Phosphorous burns had eaten away several fingers as far as the second joint. Abscesses which had developed had burst and this saved him from blood poisoning."

The Gestapo's methods were well known to resistance groups. If a member of the organisation was arrested, the rest of the group assumed that it would only be a matter of time before their comrade would break under torture. The only hope for the rest of the cell was that the captive could hold out long enough for them to move their cache of weapons and flee.

The Gestapo was so feared by the resistance – especially during the last year of the war when desperation made them even more vicious – that many chose to commit suicide rather than disappear forever inside the Gestapo's cells. Indeed, many resistance fighters were equipped with deadly cyanide capsules, which they could use if captured by the all-powerful secret police.

Murderers to the last

In 1944 – when the Soviets succeeded in pushing the Germans back on the Eastern Front and the Allies landed on the beaches in Normandy – the Gestapo's reign of terror reached its bloody climax.

A constant stream of freight trains filled with Jews, resistance members and civilians who had been detained in the German-occupied territories carried their pitiful cargo to the death camps in the East. Even as the Allies advanced



After the war, the Allies used disguised Gestapo agents to identify their former colleagues.

CORBIS/ALLOVER

The walls of the Gestapo's cells are testament to the many nationalities held there.

AKG/SCANPIX

toward Paris, Gestapo agents still busied themselves emptying prison cells and sending countless prisoners to concentration camps closer to Germany to avoid them falling into Allied hands.

When they left Paris on 18th August 1944, the Gestapo took 1,600 prisoners with them, despite protests from the Red Cross. Almost all of them died in German concentration camps.

The Gestapo continued to spread terror in German-held territories to the last, only ceasing once the Allied troops gained a foothold on German soil.

Even then, the staunchest agents continued to perform their heinous duties, among them the Gestapo interrogators Henry Rinnan and Ib Birkedal, who tortured and killed Resistance operatives until the very last days of the war in 1945.

Butcher of Lyon was hired by the US

Some Gestapo agents chose to commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Soviets or Western Allies, but most burned their identity papers, dressed in civilian clothes and tried to hide among the huge streams of refugees.

Some managed to escape their crimes. There were also several cases where former Gestapo agents were hired by the Allies, who, in the post-war era, were more interested in spying on one another than catching war criminals. Among those hired was the notorious Gestapo agent Klaus Barbie – known as the 'Butcher of Lyon' – who, according to some historians, was responsible for approximately 14,000 deaths in France. Despite his past, Barbie was employed by the US Army Counterintelligence Corps (CIC), who believed that Barbie's skills as an intelligence agent would be valuable in the fight against Communism. He was therefore hidden from the French authorities for six years until the CIC helped him escape to Bolivia in 1951. He was finally extradited to France 32 years later, where he was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity.

At the trial, his former victims described the atrocities that Barbie inflicted on them in graphic detail, but the former Gestapo man showed no signs of remorse:

"I fought the Resistance, which I respect, with hardness; but it was war and the war is over."

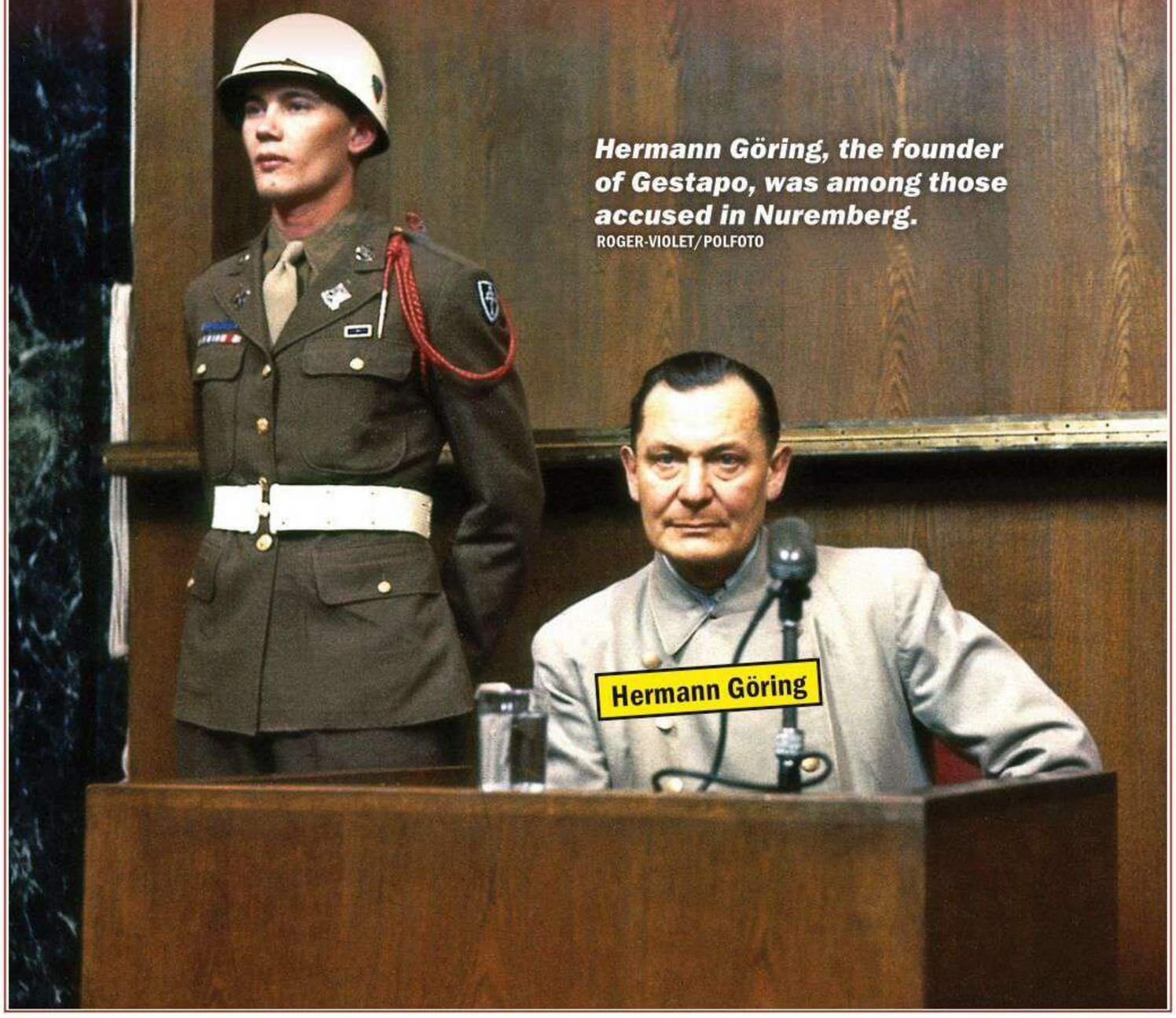
gestapo's torture methods

WATER TORTURE was used against French detainees in particular. Typically, the prisoner's head was held underwater until he or she almost drowned. Other times, the prisoner was simply left to freeze in icy water.

Gestapo's crimes were revealed in Nuremberg

After the war, prosecutors presented evidence at the Nuremberg trials proving that top Nazis had participated in the following criminal acts:

- **Creating evidence of fake attacks** against the German border, which was used as a pretext to attack Poland.
- **Coordinating the infamous Einsatzgruppen operations**, which murdered hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in Eastern Europe.
- **Executing several** political leaders and scientists in German prison camps.
- **Executing countless prisoners** of war who had tried to flee captivity.
- **Sending thousands of innocent people to death camps** or forcing them to work as slaves in brutal work camps.
- **Executing captured** Allied commandos and paratroopers.
- **Killing camp prisoners** so they would not fall into Allied hands.
- **Deporting hundreds of thousands** of civilians from German-occupied territories to provide slave labour in Germany.
- **Sending civilians from the occupied territories to Germany**, where they were subjected to secret trials and punishment.
- **Murdering relatives** of suspects being held in custody.



Hermann Göring, the founder of Gestapo, was among those accused in Nuremberg.
ROGER-VIOLET/POLFOTO

STALIN AND HITLER

Shortly after the conquest of Poland, Hitler and Stalin embark on their individual plans for the future of the shared country. The two dictators may be worlds apart ideologically, but in both parts of Poland the population pays a high price.

BY JEPPE NYBYE



GETTY IMAGES & FOTOSEARCH

"Kill without pity or mercy all men, women or children of Polish descent or language. Only in this way can we obtain the living space we need."

Hitler

Nazi Germany needed Lebensraum

German territories emptied of Poles

COUNTRY

In October 1939, Nazi Germany incorporates the western and north-western parts of Poland into the Third Reich. The rest of the German-occupied area of Poland becomes a colony to which Jews and other Poles are deported.

Only Germans may own companies

RESOURCES

The Germans confiscate all factories and companies, deporting the owners to concentration camps or forced labour camps in Germany.

Poles become slave labour force

WORKFORCE

According to Hitler's grand plan, all paid work in the annexed areas must be reserved for Germans; Poles are reduced to living at subsistence levels like slaves.

Education centres are closed

EDUCATION

Teachers and university staff are arrested in large numbers and sent to concentration camps. Poles are to become German slaves and so will require no education.

The Catholic Church is attacked

RELIGION

Hitler wants to eradicate Polish culture forever. As a result, the Nazis target the Catholic Church, sending thousands of priests to concentration camps.

Ethnic cleansing plans

POPULACE

Once all the Jews have been eradicated, Hitler plans to work the remaining Poles to death. This will create the *lebensraum* (living space), which will allow the growing German population to spread across Poland's fertile plains and farmlands.

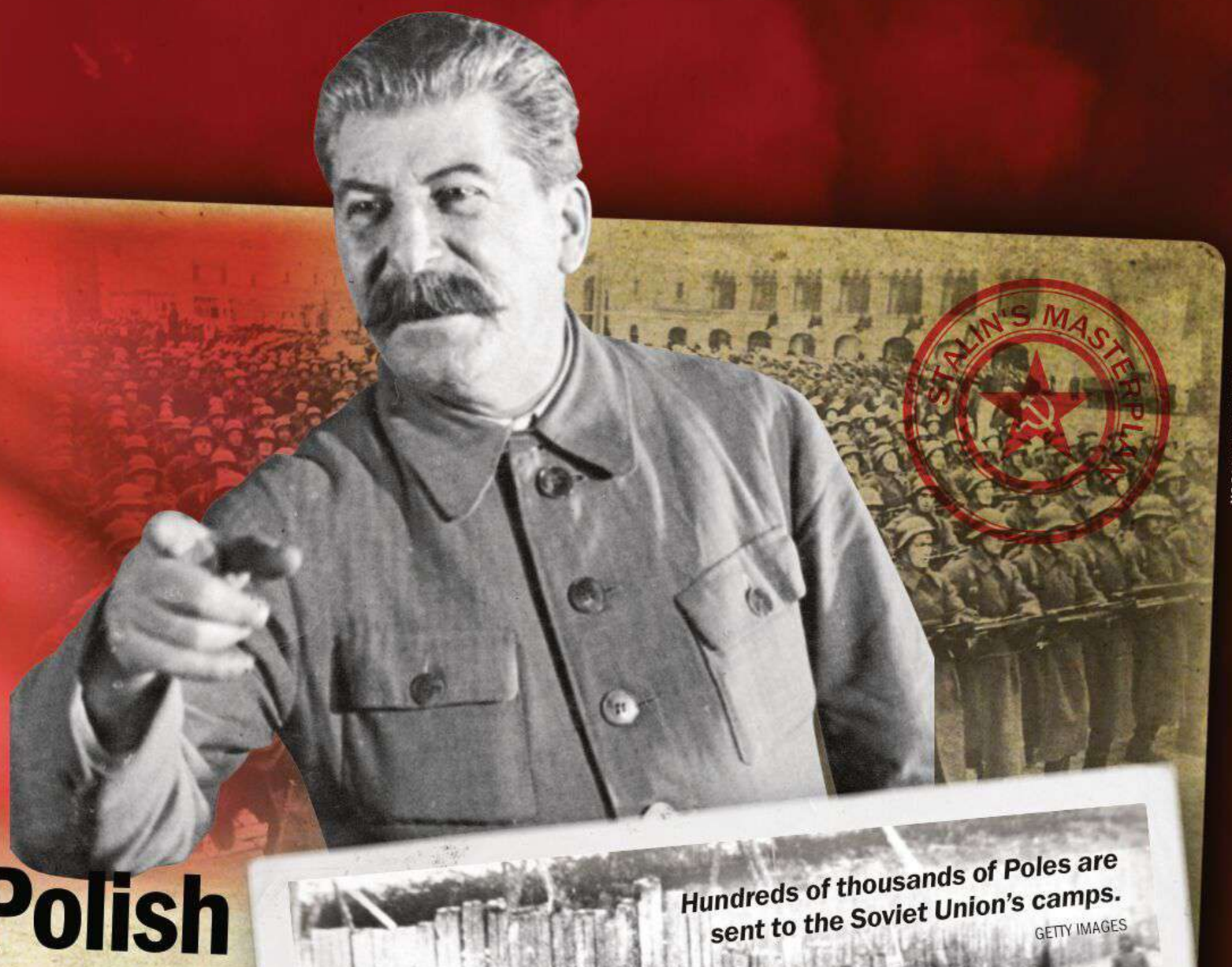




In October 1939, German troops begin to execute Polish civilians.

AKG IMAGES

WIPED OUT POLAND



GETTY IMAGES & SHUTTERSTOCK

"Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach."
Stalin

Soviets sent Polish elite to Siberia

Poles vote on their future

COUNTRY

Soviets hold a referendum on 22nd October, 1939 to legitimise their invasion. The result is rigged to show that Poles in the Soviet zone wish to become part of the Soviet Union. According to Soviet authorities, 98 percent of Poles vote for incorporation.

Assets stripped from the country

RESOURCES

The new regime seizes all stockpiles of clothing, medicine, food and even needles, thread and knives. All supplies are shipped to the Soviet Union.

Unemployed sent to Russia

WORKFORCE

Soviet occupation troops send unemployed Poles and war refugees to Russia to work. Many end up in the Ural Mountains or on one of the remote collective farms.

Russian becomes the primary language

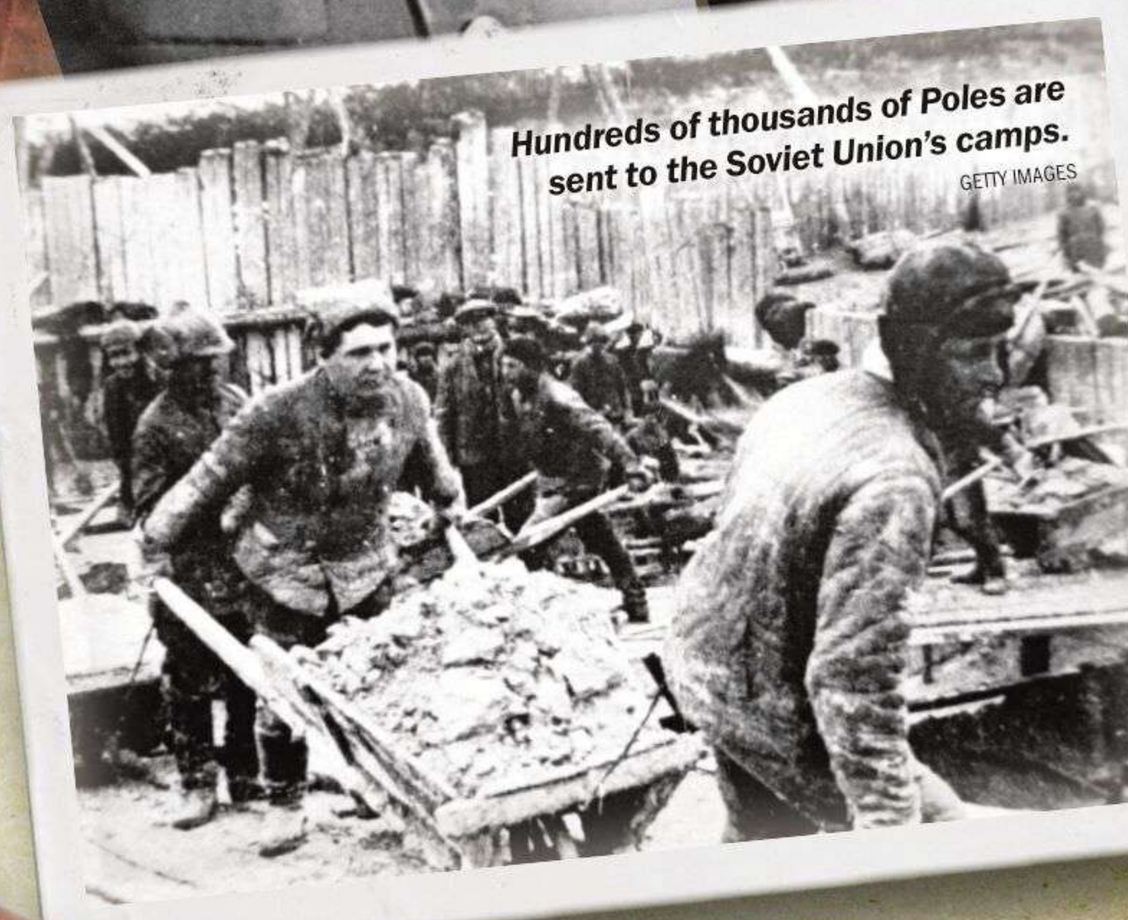
EDUCATION

At schools and universities, the Soviet Union introduces a whole new curriculum. Teaching must adhere to Soviet Communist teachings and capitalism is to be condemned. Russian becomes the primary language in all education.

The Catholic Church is targeted

RELIGION

Communists regard religion as opium for the people. Over time, Poles must be converted into good atheists, and several prominent priests are arrested as a result. However, plans to close churches are abandoned after initial attempts lead to massive riots.



Hundreds of thousands of Poles are sent to the Soviet Union's camps.
GETTY IMAGES



Capitalists are removed

POPULACE

The Communist Soviet Union believes its main task is to fight capitalists and the bourgeoise. The new Poland will be a classless society where landowners, business owners and intellectuals are considered undesirable. They're consequently arrested in large numbers by the Soviet NKVD security service and deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. 1.5 million people are detained and incarcerated between February and May 1940 alone.

Highly armed NKVD agents often arrested their victims at night and deported them.
SHUTTERSTOCK



OPPRESSION: *The Kempeitai punished its detractors brutally in Japan and cruelly hunted down members of the resistance in occupied countries.*

GETTY IMAGES

THE KEMPEITAI

JAPAN'S GESTAPO STOPPED AT NOTHING

Everyone feared Japan's military police, the Kempeitai, who rained down pain and death on civilians, resistance fighters and prisoners of war throughout the Far East. Japanese atrocities were among the worst crimes of World War II, yet very few were punished for their offences.



AKG IMAGES

HUMAN TESTING: *The Kempeitai selected prisoners of war to be used in medical experiments.*



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

EXECUTION: *Members of the resistance, prisoners of war and innocent civilians were all killed under the Kempeitai's direction.*

JAPAN/1881-1945

Japan's modern army quickly conquers large parts of Asia. After the army's victory, the country's military police, the Kempeitai, move in to brutally and effectively quash all resistance efforts against the occupying power.



BY TROELS USSING

With a crack, the bamboo stick hit the back of Sybil Kathigasu. The 44-year-old nurse flinched from the pain, but after more than three months in prison, she'd grown accustomed to suppressing her screams when questioned – even though her back was now a mass of wounds after countless blows.

The Malayan woman still hadn't revealed the names of the members of the resistance whom she had helped during the war against Japan in 1943.

"Speak out, you resistance bitch!" cried Sergeant Yoshimura. He struck her again. It was the same method of torture that had led the Japanese to the nurse in the first place. A resistance member had broken down after hundreds of strokes and revealed Kathigasu's identity.

As a sergeant in the Kempeitai, Japan's notorious military police, Yoshimura would stop at nothing in his efforts to uncover conspiracies against the empire. When his beatings failed, he tried another way to loosen the tight-lipped prisoner's tongue: his assistant dragged in Kathigasu's seven-year-old daughter.

From the pole where Kathigasu was tied up, she looked on with horror as Yoshimura wrapped a rope around the girl's frail body and lifted her into a tree. Giant ants from the tree trunk quickly began crawling over the girl, but Yoshimura didn't stop there – the sergeant lit a fire beneath the tree, so the smoke enveloped Kathigasu's daughter, and the flames drew menacingly near to her feet.

"Speak out or I will cut the rope and burn your daughter alive!" Yoshimura screamed at his recalcitrant prisoner.

"No!" Kathigasu answered defiantly. She realised that they would both die, whether she spoke or not. And if she revealed anything, more resistance members would have to go through the same hell that she and her daughter were now enduring.

"Be very brave, Mummy. Do not tell. We will both die and Jesus will wait for us in heaven above," her daughter called out, but her courageous words caused Yoshimura to fly into a rage. He ordered his assistant to cut the rope.

Sergeant Yoshimura's methods were neither unusual nor uniquely

Only the best became Kempei

In order to become a Kempei – a member of the Kempeitai – the applicant had to be a skilled soldier and devoid of compassion.

Requirements: military experience

Applicants needed at least six years military service before they could undertake the year-long Kempei training. The only exception was linguistics experts recruited by the foreign office.

Syllabus: law and espionage

The recruits were taught legal grounds for arresting Japanese citizens, but they were also trained to follow suspects and decipher coded messages.

Self-defence: tough training

Martial arts, such as kendo and judo, were part of the training, but fencing and riding were also traditional disciplines that a Kempei had to master.

Qualification: armband

After a year's training, a new kempei was given an armband to show he belonged to the Kempeitai.

A Kempei wore the same uniform as the rest of the Japanese army. Only the armband identified him as a member of the military police.

The words '*ken*' ('law') and '*hey*' ('soldier') were written in red on the white armbands of Kempei.

SHUTTERSTOCK, ARKIV, HIKISHOP.COM

cruel compared to other techniques used by Kempei soldiers.

During World War II, the Kempeitai routinely committed atrocities against prisoners of war, members of the resistance and innocent civilians. The horrors continued right up until the last days of the war.

Feared by Japanese officers

When the Kempeitai was established in 1881, no one could predict that it would one day terrorise the entire Far East. The name meant 'Law Soldier Regiment' and the initial force of 349 men was tasked with ensuring Japanese peasants attended military service when summoned.

A farmer who remained at home on his farm would find himself visited by a Kempei – a soldier from the military police – who would escort him to the nearest barracks.

With Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, the Kempeitai moved abroad for the first time and became responsible for keeping the peace in occupied territories.

The unit became the Japanese equivalent of Hitler's Gestapo, and like its German counterpart, the Kempeitai had virtually unlimited powers to arrest and interrogate anyone they wanted.

A Kempei could even arrest Japanese officers, including those of a higher rank than himself, and punish them with lashes if he saw fit.

This is why the Kempeitai was hated and feared among its own ranks. Japan's civilian population didn't feel safe either, because during the 1930s, the Kempeitai was also tasked with keeping the peace at home and offering unconditional support for the country's expansionist policy, which was gathering momentum.

Between 1933-36, the force arrested 59,013 people in Japan and the occupied parts of Korea and China for having 'dangerous thoughts'. And the

“All we could do was wait, tense, racked daily by terrible fear”

British journalist in China on the fear induced by the Kempeitai

Kempeitai’s hunt for state enemies would only increase in scale and brutality.

A striking cobra

The military police soon gained a reputation for being incredibly effective at tracking down wanted people.

Former German officer Walther Stennes, who had fled from Hitler’s Germany to China, was in Shanghai when the Japanese conquered the city in 1937. He likened being suspected by the Kempeitai to being in a darkened room with a cobra, and waiting for it to strike.

He came to the Kempeitai’s attention because he served as an advisor to the Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek. When the head of the Kempeitai in Shanghai invited Stennes to dinner, the German didn’t dare refuse.

The Japanese told him that it was fortunate that he’d gone to them voluntarily, because his case file was five centimetres thick, and they had been about to have him killed.

Stennes’s case file was just one among many collected by the Kempeitai who hoarded intelligence like their Gestapo counterparts. From Korea to China and the Philippines, filing cabinets were packed with reports of people suspected of ‘anti-Japanese behaviour’. This information came from the Kempeitai’s tireless shadowing of suspects, phone interceptions and knowledge gathered from informants.

Both in Japan and the occupied territories, the Kempeitai secretly recruited civilians as spies. The luckiest were paid for their efforts, but many worked for free – often under duress because of a strong hold the Kempeitai had over them.

Thousands were forced to report on the conversations and activities of their employers; if they had nothing to tell, they risked being punished themselves for not co-operating. One desperate informant begged his colleague to “give me a piece of paper with something – anything – written on it”, saying that he had to make a report to the Kempeitai that day.

Softened up by the sound of torture

When a case file contained incriminating material, the suspect was arrested and driven to the nearest Kempeitai interrogation centre. During World War II, such centres popped up all over the Japanese empire, invoking terror in the region’s civilians.

British journalist Ralph Shaw described his life in Shanghai when the Kempeitai moved in: “Every day, the news spread of more arrests… All we could do was wait, tense, racked daily by terrible fear, sleepless in our beds as the sound of footsteps anywhere sent us into cold sweats and heart-pounding terror.”

Each Kempeitai interrogation centre was equipped with prison cells and torture chambers. Part of the centres’ psychological torture consisted of allowing detainees in their cells to hear the screams of other prisoners being tortured by a Kempei. New arrivals just sat there, waiting for it to be their turn. During his training in Japan, a Kempei was not taught methods of torture; he learnt them on the job, while the Kempeitai handbook stated that mere “hints of future physical discomforts, for example, torture, murder, starvation, solitary confinement, deprivation of sleep” would be extremely useful during interrogations.

The same handbook also emphasised that the use of “torture, including kicks, punching and anything connected with physical suffering” was allowed in the fight against Japan’s enemies. What form of coercion a Kempei used was up to the individual, but people suspected of being spies or members of the resistance were routinely subjected to torture if they did not immediately reveal everything.

In the autumn of 1943, Malayan nurse Sybil Kathigasu suffered numerous types of torture before her daughter was eventually hung up over a crackling fire. Among other methods, the Kempeitai placed iron bars in a fire, then pressed the red-hot metal against Kathigasu’s bare skin, causing her screams to ring out through the

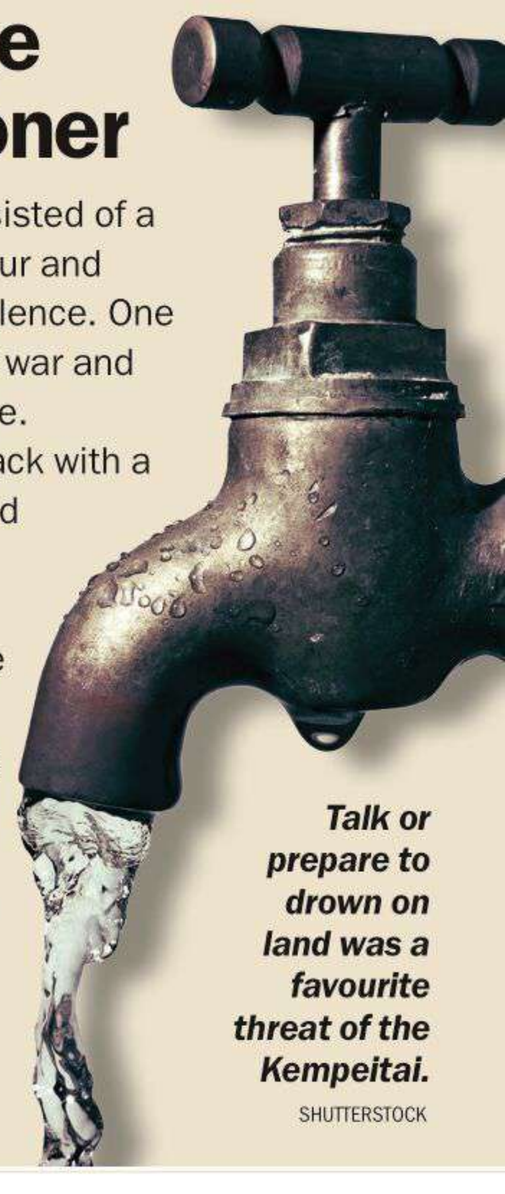
Water torture broke prisoner after prisoner

Interrogations by the Kempeitai often consisted of a series of questions repeated hour after hour and accompanied by some form of physical violence. One particular method used to get prisoners of war and civilians to disclose plans was water torture.

The victim was tied up and laid on his back with a cloth over his face, then the Kempei poured water into his mouth and nostrils.

“Water poured down my windpipe and throat and filled my lungs and stomach. The torrent was unimaginably choking,” recalls Eric Lomax, a Scotsman who fainted during questioning at one of the Kempeitai interrogation centres in Thailand.

The torture was often so brutal that the Kempei had to step on the victim to force the water out again so the prisoner didn’t drown during the interrogation.



Talk or prepare to drown on land was a favourite threat of the Kempeitai.

SHUTTERSTOCK

SHUTTERSTOCK

The Kempeitai singled out victims for human experimentation

By 1935, Japan had built a large plant in occupied Manchuria, in northern China. Here, scientists experimented with chemical and biological warfare.

The Kempeitai was responsible for supplying so-called Unit 731 with prisoners on which the scientists could experiment. If a prisoner was considered unrepentant, worthless or irredeemably anti-Japanese, the Kempeitai transported him to northern China, where a gruesome death awaited. While the victim was still alive, his limbs were cut off to study the effects of blood loss, or he was infected with diseases such as typhoid, cholera or bubonic plague, so that doctors could assess whether Japan should use such biological weapons.

Unit 731 injected toxins into prisoners to assess which chemical agents worked best. Some of the empire's victims ended their days strapped to a target, so that Japanese could assess the most effective range for a flamethrower.

At the end of World War II, the Kempeitai was given responsibility for destroying the plant in northern China and erasing all evidence of the atrocities that had taken place there, but it failed to complete the task before the Soviet troops moved in.



'Worthless' POWs risked ending up as Japanese guinea pigs.

prison. On other occasions, the nurse was hung upside down by one leg for hours at a time and had metal splinters pushed under her nails. But Kathigasu never broke – not even when her daughter was about to be burnt in front of her. At the last minute, a high-ranking Kempei came by and stopped Sergeant Yoshimura from carrying out his threat. The daughter was sent home and Kathigasu was thrown into a labour camp.

Sex slaves funded army

In addition to detecting and interrogating suspects, the Kempeitai also engaged in propaganda. Within Japan, the military police praised the army to the skies, leading the population to believe that victory was within reach, right up until the end of the war and Japan's surrender.

In occupied territories, the Kempeitai created posters and produced radio broadcasts that portrayed Japan as a great liberator, who had come to give people a better life.

Behind the scenes, the Kempeitai had another role: scraping money together to pay for the war. Some seized banks, while others demanded protection money in return for not burning down companies' factories and warehouses.

A third source of revenue for the Kempeitai was a huge network of brothels across the empire. Here, Japanese soldiers could satisfy their sexual needs when posted far from home. The bordellos were supposed to raise the morale of the soldiers and were situated both in cities and close to the front line. In some places, railway wagons were even transformed into mobile whorehouses.

Until the early 1930s, the prostitutes working in these brothels were volunteers who desperately needed the money, but as the Japanese started to occupy large parts of Southeast Asia and the fight encompassed many new fronts, the Kempeitai needed to find more and more women to service its soldiers.

Tens of thousands of Asian teens were lured with false promises of a job, or simply abducted and threatened with death if they tried to escape, then placed in the brothels. In Indonesia, the Japanese also took Australian and Dutch girls from prison camps.

"They started to drag us away one by one. And I could hear all the screaming coming from the bedrooms, you know, and you just wait for your turn… And there stood this large, fat, bald Japanese officer looking at me, grinning at me," recalled Dutch national Jan Ruff O'Herne. After a few days, she hacked off all her hair in the hope that the Japanese soldiers would no longer find her attractive and would leave her alone. But it had no effect. The soldiers often queued outside the brothels for hours at a time, and the women were forced to have sex with between 20 and 60 men a day.

One Filipino girl described how she was bleeding so much and in such great pain that she couldn't stand up. With soldiers queuing from 14.00 to 22.00 every day, she didn't even have time to wash herself after each assault.

The soldiers paid two to three yen for a visit to the brothels, and the Kempeitai sent the money to the war department to boost its meagre resources. In total, more than 200,000 women are believed to have been exploited as sex slaves – or "comfort girls", as the Kempeitai called them.

Pacifying prisoners of war

Captive Allied soldiers couldn't escape the Kempeitai either. Although the Japanese army controlled hundreds of prison and labour camps, the military police were responsible for interning prisoners and preventing contact with resistance groups outside the barbed wire fence.

The Japanese were worried about prisoners escaping the camps and sabotaging the supply lines to troops on the front line, which led to even the smallest offences being brutally punished. For example, if prisoners managed to build a radio receiver, the person who hid the device risked being beaten to death, but only after hours of torture, where the Kempeitai would try to get him to reveal his conspirators.

Prolonged periods of being hung upside down, isolation in dark rooms and being burnt with cigarettes were all part of the Kempeitai's regular arsenal, but when facing an enemy who had been cowardly enough to surrender, some Kempei developed particularly brutal torture techniques, as experienced by one Australian lieutenant: "The interviewer produced a small piece of wood like a meat

skewer, pushed that into my left ear, and tapped it in with a small hammer. I think I fainted some time after it went through the drum."

The torture often took place within sight of other prisoners in the camp – to scare them as much as possible and disuade them from making plans to escape, trying to talk to locals through the barbed wire fence or doing anything forbidden.

British military doctor Ken Adams was forced to watch a comrade being beaten to death by the Kempeitai in a Japanese prison camp in Thailand: "The beating lasted a long time. I can't say how long, but the bastards knew how to prolong his torture and didn't want him to die too quickly. I can still hear those screams. If the purpose of the violence was to provide an object lesson in why not to build and operate a radio, it was very effective."

Covering their tracks

While the war was going well for Japan, the Kempeitai didn't worry about how many victims were tortured to death, but when the tide turned, they began destroying the evidence. On 15th August 1945, when Emperor Hirohito announced on the radio that Japan had surrendered, large bonfires were lit outside interrogation centres throughout the empire. Case files were thrown into the flames in an attempt to destroy any trace of the years of atrocities. Eventually, the Kempei threw their white armbands into the flames, too, and while the evidence turned to ash, they drove away from the interrogation centres and prison camps to disappear.

US sources estimate that by the end of the war, their numbers had swelled to "70,000 Kempei of all ranks, 24,000 of whom are officers", but very few were ever prosecuted due to a lack of evidence. However, victims who had survived the military police's brutal war crimes were able to identify and testify against those who had been captured by Allied troops.

In Malaysia, 35 Kempei were tried. Nurse Sybil Kathigasu was one of the many victims who, in February 1946, took to the witness stand and told of the barbaric and illegal treatment she'd endured at the hands of Sergeant Yoshimura.

29 of the 35 accused Kempei from the Malaysian camps were hanged for their crimes. Yoshimura was one of them.

Mass murder crushed resistance

The Kempeitai conducted several massacres across the empire. One of the worst public mass executions was aimed at deterring Indonesians from helping Allied resistance groups.

Shooting was among the more humane execution methods used by the Kempeitai.
SHUTTERSTOCK

In the spring of 1942, Japanese forces captured around 200 British and Dutch nationals on the Indonesian island of Java. The Europeans had been waging guerrilla warfare against the Japanese occupying power, and the Kempeitai decided to set an example before others were tempted to join the freedom fighters. Each prisoner was squeezed into a small basket, ordinarily used by locals to transport pigs. Four or five trucks then drove the baskets towards the coast. The prisoners were given nothing to drink in the burning sun, and became increasingly thirsty as the trucks travelled to the port of Surabaya. In front of the shaken Indonesian locals, the Kempeitai sailed the prisoners out to sea, then toppled basket after basket into the water, drowning the captives.

960,000 Jews

70,000-75,000 Poles

21,000 Romanies

15,000 S[illegible]t prison

of war

10,000-[illegible]

nation[illegible]

RUDOLF HÖSS

SS commandant Rudolf Höss lived with his family just outside Auschwitz, where he murdered thousands daily.

RAINER HÖSS/INST FÜR ZEITGESCHICHTE MÜNCHEN – BERLIN, SLG. HÖSS, NR. 203 & SHUTTERSTOCK

RUDOLF HÖSS

FAMILY MAN BUILT HITLER'S DEATH FACTORY

In 1940 Rudolf Höss was ordered to build Auschwitz concentration camp. He was neither a fanatic nor a psychopath, but blind obedience made him the greatest mass murderer in history.



US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

BY MIKKEL ANDERSSON

It was a shabby-looking Rudolf Höss who bid farewell to the world on 16th April 1947. There was no trace left of the icy, efficient *Konzentrationslager* (KZ – or concentration – camp) commandant who, years before, had wandered through an empire of suffering and death that he had created, dressed in an immaculate SS uniform.

Now Höss embarked on his final voyage wearing an informal, dirty jacket and oversized trousers, his hands tied behind his back. As he stepped up onto the small stool under the noose, he could see the ruins of the death camp that he himself had built and ruled over for years. A camp that more than anything else had come to represent the Nazi regime's worst crimes: Auschwitz.

No one knows what Höss thought in these final moments. But he was the only Nazi death camp commandant to write an autobiography. The book provides an uncanny insight into how a hardworking, dutiful and loving family father became, in his own words, "the greatest destroyer of human beings, who carried out every order to exterminate people no matter what".

Young Höss learned obedience from his father

Rudolf Höss, the man who would one day become the Nazis' greatest mass murderer, was born in 1901 in the spa town of Baden-Baden. His father was a highly religious, retired colonel who raised his son with rigorous discipline. "I was taught to obey all adults, especially older people, and treat them with respect no matter what the circumstances," Höss wrote many years later while awaiting his fate.

According to Höss, he had no playmates as a child. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 led the lonely boy to dream of a soldier's life. Two years into the war, he managed to enlist in the army as a 16-year-old.

After the war, Höss returned home a hardened war veteran, only to discover that his parents had died, and his home had been destroyed. Bitter about the hardships of life he turned to the one community that had never failed him: his fellow soldiers. Höss enlisted in the nationalist *Freikorps* (Free Corps), which in the chaotic years following World War I fought the Communists. In 1922, he joined the strongest of the nationalist groups, the Nazi party, whose leader was another war veteran: Adolf Hitler. Thus, Höss's fate was sealed.

In 1934, following Hitler's takeover of Germany, Höss received an irresistible offer when Heinrich Himmler, the head of Hitler's personal bodyguard, the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), sought him out. The SS, which needed people with Höss's experience, was also responsible for guarding prisoners in the regime's newly created concentration camps where political opponents were increasingly finding themselves incarcerated.

Himmler guaranteed quick promotion and good pay. Höss was persuaded and shortly thereafter transferred to the Nazi state's first permanent KZ camp at Dachau. The camp was commanded by Theodor Eicke, who taught Höss how to manage a concentration camp.

"Anyone who shows even the slightest vestige of sympathy towards them [the prisoners] must immediately vanish from our ranks. I need only hard, totally committed SS men. There is no place amongst us for soft people," Eicke declared.

Auschwitz built to house Polish

World War II started when Hitler's troops invaded western Poland in September 1939. In the wake of the occupation, thousands of Polish nationalists and communists were arrested. The SS therefore decided to build new concentration camps in Poland.

In spring 1940, Höss, who had risen up the SS hierarchy, was sent to south-western Poland to find a suitable site for a camp. Near the small Polish town of Oswiecim – 'Auschwitz' in German – he found a disused barracks that perfectly suited his needs. It was hidden from

KZ system's creator taught Höss

One element of Auschwitz that has etched itself on people's shared consciousness is the infamous sign placed on the gate into the camp: *'Arbeit Macht Frei'* – 'Work Sets You Free'. The motto was devised by SS man Theodor Eicke, who was Höss's teacher. Eicke is considered the architect of the Nazi regime's concentration camp system.

In 1933 Hitler appointed Eicke as commandant of the first German KZ camp, Dachau, which became the model for all later camps. Eicke hailed the idea that hard work and brutal violence could cure the Nazi regime's political opponents of their delusions. Höss became one of Eicke's most loyal employees.

In the camp, Eicke insisted on strict discipline, with even the smallest offence being punished by public whipping, humiliation or death. At the same time, he taught his subordinates that even one's own family should be eradicated if SS doctrines required it.

Theodor Eicke was killed on the Eastern Front in 1943, but Höss continued his mentor's brutal legacy to the bitter end of the war in his own camp, Auschwitz.



ULLSTEIN BILD & SHUTTERSTOCK

THEODOR EICKE
Rudolf Höss learned all about KZ camps when he worked for Eicke.

Family villa overlooked camp

The Höss family lived in a villa just a stone's throw from Auschwitz's gas chamber, where from 1942 onwards, Höss' regime murdered Jews and prisoners of war, before burning their bodies in the crematorium.

MIKKEL JUUL JENSEN / BHTL

1 Arrival

Auschwitz is initially built for 10,000 prisoners but is later extended. Prisoners arrive via special trains inside sealed livestock wagons.



The railway was right next to Auschwitz.

SHUTTERSTOCK

2 The weak are taken aside

After unloading, the prisoners are sorted into two groups at the railhead.

3 The fit are spared

Prisoners who are assessed as capable of work are sent to the camp's barracks. There, they receive haircuts and prison uniforms.

4 The gas chamber exterminates the weak

Those prisoners considered too weak to work are taken to the camp's gas chamber. Here, guards order them to undress for disinfection. Inside the 'shower' room, they are gassed with Zyklon B poison. The bodies are then burned next door in the crematorium.

The Zyklon B poison was poured into the gas chamber through holes in the ceiling.



DPA/SCANPIX

Camp kitchen

Gallows and execution wall

Electric fence

Watchtower

MATANYA

Höss's luxury villa was only a few hundred metres from the gas chamber and crematorium. In the garden the children played while the prisoners lived and died in abject misery nearby.



Höss' two-storey villa is still located at Auschwitz.



the world, easily extendable and several railway lines ran nearby.

The Auschwitz plan was immediately accepted by Himmler, who appointed Höss as the camp commandant.

"In the shortest possible time I was supposed to create a transition camp for ten thousand prisoners from the existing complex of well-preserved buildings. The buildings were filthy and teemed with lice, fleas, and other bugs, and as far as sanitation was concerned, practically nothing was available," wrote Höss, who suddenly seemed overwhelmed by the enormity of the task.

The camp prisoners were to convert the swampy area around the camp into agricultural land that German



YAD VASHEM

Höss impregnated inmate

It was strictly forbidden for the SS at Auschwitz to take mistresses from the camp's prison population. Nevertheless in 1942, Rudolf Höss, the camp commandant himself, initiated a relationship with political prisoner Eleonore Hodys. Höss secretly pressed her to sleep with him, ending the relationship when Eleonore became pregnant.

In fear of the consequences, Höss imprisoned her in one of the camp's prison cells in the hope that she would starve to death. However, Eleonore managed to tell one of the camp's other SS officers about the situation. He let her go free and later blackmailed Höss. Eleonore subsequently had an abortion and was sent to the Dachau camp, which was liberated by the Americans in 1945.

colonists could cultivate. "I assumed that I would be successful in providing better housing for them and feeding them better than in the old camps," Höss wrote.

Working as quickly as possible, the newly appointed commandant set up fences, erected watchtowers and built a crematorium. But he didn't manage to refit the old, damp brick barracks before July 1940 when the first prisoner transports rolled in. Consequently, the inmates were housed in miserable conditions.

The camp commandant's own life was in stark contrast to that of the inmates. Höss and his family moved into a splendid villa just outside the camp perimeter. The house was surrounded by a three-metre-high wall that partially obscured the overcrowded camp on the other side.

"Yes, my family had it good in Auschwitz, every wish that my wife or my children had was fulfilled. The children could live free and easy. My wife had her flower paradise", confessed Höss in his memoirs.

Prisoners ate each other

Outside the family's little paradise, however, life was quite different. Despite Höss' plans for a KZ camp with better conditions than other concentration camps, Auschwitz quickly became notorious for its extreme brutality and the high death rate of inmates. The reason, according to Höss, was that all his time was consumed with the problems of developing Auschwitz, while the prisoners were left to the camp guards, who rarely followed his orders.

"I became bitterly aware that all of my good aspirations and the best of my intentions were ruined by the human shortcomings and stubbornness of most of the officers and men who were assigned to me," he wrote.

Thwarted ambitions or not, Auschwitz expanded massively under Höss's leadership. Several sub-camps shot up into what was rapidly turning into a camp complex filled with a constant influx of new prisoners. After Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, Höss was ordered to build a new camp five kilometres from the original one. Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, was to surpass all other concentration camps in size; it would accommodate a hundred thousand Russian prisoners of war.

The initial idea was to have the prisoners build the camp themselves, but most of them were too starved to work effectively. Even Höss was shocked at their condition. He later wrote: "They died like flies because of their weakened physical condition or from the slightest illness, which their bodies could no longer fight off."

Prisoner numbers were so high that Höss had difficulty providing them with even the bare minimum of nutrition. Hunger made the Soviet prisoners desperate. In several cases, Höss's guards found corpses of Russians who had been killed by their fellow inmates and partially devoured.

At the same time, Höss was given orders to devise a way in which incapacitated prisoners could be executed effectively. According to his memoirs, Höss was distressed by the idea, but an order was an order. After experimenting with the pesticide Zyklon B, Höss converted part of an old crematorium into a gas chamber. In September 1941, 900 Russians were forced into the chamber, after which the poison gas was dropped through from holes in the ceiling.

"As the gas was thrown in some of them yelled 'Gas!' and a tremendous screaming and shoving started toward both doors, but the doors were able to withstand all the force," Höss wrote.

His main concern was not the execution, but that the crematorium furnaces could not keep up with the number of corpses. However, things were about to get far worse.



US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

In 1942 Auschwitz was transformed into an extermination camp, where thousands of Jewish men, women and children were sent to the gas chambers on a daily basis.

Auschwitz would now kill Jews

The enormous pressures of work made Höss cold and distant in the company of his fellow officers, and often he didn't get home until late at night. However, according to Danuta Rzempiel, one of the housekeepers who visited the villa, he always made time to play with his children:

"At home, Höss was ideal. He loved the children. He liked to lie down with them on the sofa in their room. He kissed them, caressed them, and talked



to them in a lovely way. Past the threshold of the house he changed totally. He never said a word to me," she said to Piotr Setkiewicz (*The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*).

In the summer of 1942, Höss was called to Berlin for a fateful meeting with Himmler, who had a new assignment for him: "All the Jews within our reach must be annihilated during this war. If we do not succeed in destroying the biological foundation of Jewry now, then one day the Jews will destroy the German people," the SS chief declared.

According to Himmler, Auschwitz, with its railway lines to occupied Europe, was the ideal centre for the planned genocide. Soviet prisoners of war, who were originally to have been housed in the newly built camp, had been sent to other camps to work on weapons production. Instead, Höss was ordered to transform Auschwitz-Birkenau into the Nazi's largest extermination camp.

It was a shaken Höss who left Berlin the same day – most of all because he realised how many practical problems Himmler's order entailed. However, he did not question the extermination programme itself.

"At the time I wasted no thoughts about it. I had received an order; I had to carry it out. I could not allow myself to form an opinion as to whether this mass extermination of the Jews was necessary or not," he later wrote.

Instead, the weary commandant took comfort in the fact that his attempts to gas Russian prisoners of war had been successful and that the method could now be used to exterminate the Jews.

Preparations for mass murder

Over the following weeks, Höss worked day and night to prepare Auschwitz-Birkenau for mass murder. A little west of the camp, set among other buildings, two abandoned farmhouses were converted into gas

Swamped by corpses

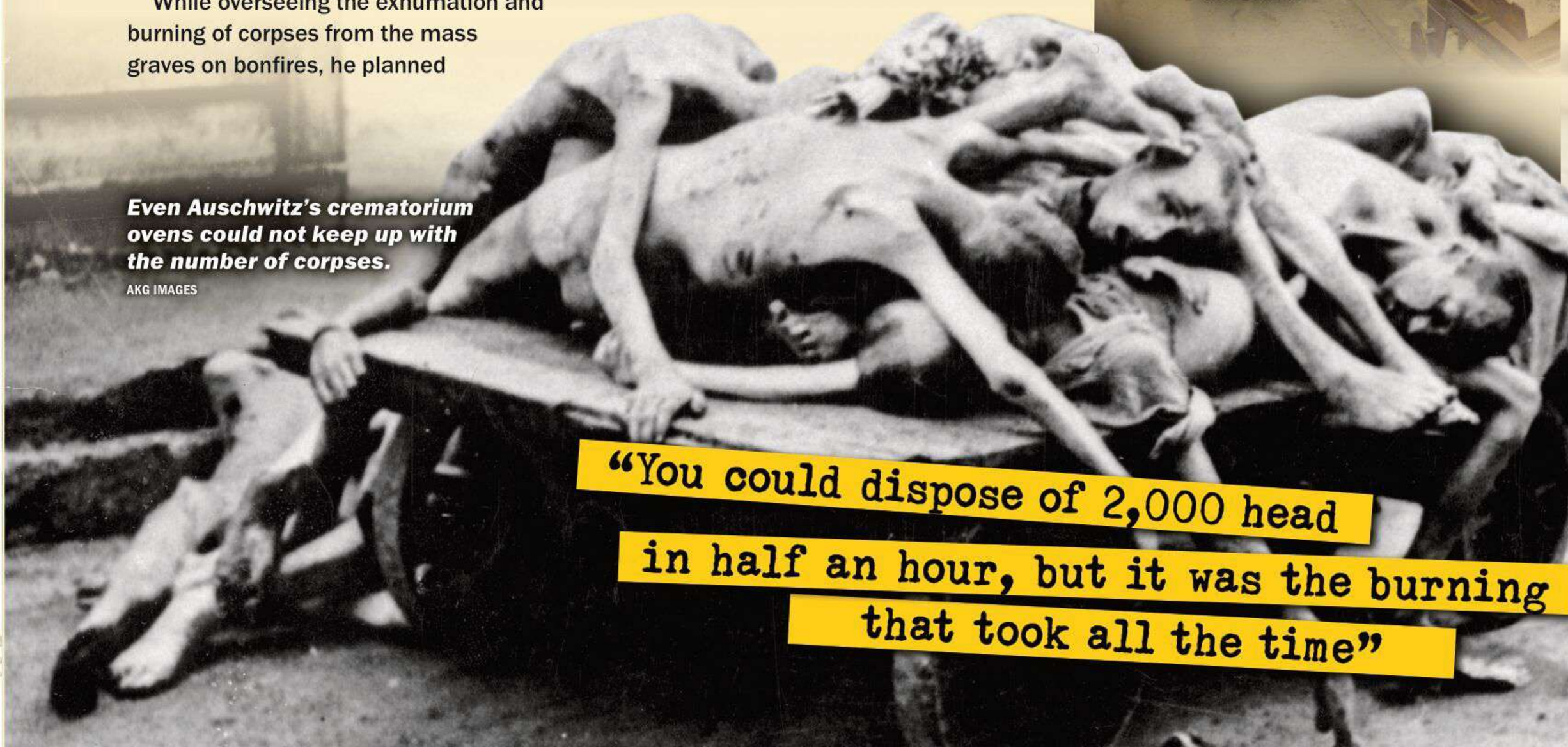
According to Rudolf Höss, it was not difficult to murder thousands of people daily in Auschwitz. The problem was getting rid of the bodies.

Until the autumn of 1942, the majority of Auschwitz's victims were thrown into mass graves, because the crematorium in the original Auschwitz camp could not keep up with the slaughter. But Himmler ordered Höss to erase all trace of the mass killing.

Höss therefore designed an industrial-scale solution.

While overseeing the exhumation and burning of corpses from the mass graves on bonfires, he planned the most efficient killing factories that mankind has ever seen. According to the Nazis' own estimates, the system could burn 4,756 corpses a day. But even their capacity was not enough. As Höss later wrote, "The killing itself took the least time. You could dispose of 2,000 head in half an hour, but it was the burning that took all the time."





Even Auschwitz's crematorium ovens could not keep up with the number of corpses.
AKG IMAGES

"You could dispose of 2,000 head in half an hour, but it was the burning that took all the time"



AKG IMAGES

In January 1945, the Germans evacuated Auschwitz and sent 58,000 prisoners to camps in Germany. When the Red Army arrived, only the weakest inmates remained.

chambers, the largest of which could accommodate as many as 1,200 people.

The facilities were thus in place when the first train of around a thousand Jewish people rolled in. A group of SS doctors sorted them on arrival: a third, so-called "strong and healthy" Jews, were selected for work, while the remaining 638 were sent directly to the gas chamber. According to Höss, he allowed his staff to write 'Shower' and 'Disinfection' on the doors of the death chambers to reassure the victims.

Getting ready for these 'showers' served another purpose: "The psychology of the undressing phase helped to cow the groups of people," Höss wrote, happy to avoid any unnecessary panic. The gassing started and after 25 minutes the last desperate screams from the chamber ceased. A fan was started, after which special prisoner work units, the Sonderkommando, removed the dead bodies.

Over the following months, thousands of Jews were gassed at an ever-increasing rate. Höss often observed the condemned prisoners, and he was particularly fascinated by the women who were suspicious of what was happening, but still able to remain calm for their children. One day, "[A woman] stepped very close to me and whispered, pointing to her four children, 'How can you murder these beautiful, darling children? Don't you have any heart?'" He later recalled while awaiting trial.

On another occasion, a group of women realised their fate as the guards began to close the gas chamber's doors behind them: "I saw a woman trying to shove her children out of the chamber, crying out, 'Why don't you at least let my precious children live?'" Höss recounted.

In his memoirs, Höss acknowledged that the experiences shook him; however, he never showed it: "I had to appear cold and heartless during these events which tear the heart apart in anyone who had any kind of human feelings."

Roasted meat could be smelled everywhere

At home in his villa, however, Höss could no longer mask his dejection, particularly when the fortunes of war turned. He

Executioners were ordinary people

When Rudolf Höss was arrested people believed he must be a monster who enjoyed killing. However, research suggests only a select few SS people worked in the camps for that reason. Their main motivations were typically:

ϟϟ Obedience and peer pressure

The SS staff in Auschwitz were ardent Nazis indoctrinated to carry out any order without asking questions. But many also felt that, for the sake of their colleagues, they had a duty to endure the atrocities.

ϟϟ Anti-Semitism

Contempt and hated for Jews was prevalent among the SS and many were trained to see the Jews as a dangerous enemies who desired world domination and the destruction of the Aryan race.

ϟϟ Security

Although the work of killing thousands of innocent people on a daily basis was undoubtedly psychologically distressing to many SS people, it was also safe. The risk of dying as a guard in an extermination camp was minimal compared to fighting as a soldier on the Eastern Front, for example.



YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Test showed anyone can be a monster

In 1961, US psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted an obedience experiment to show how far an authority figure could push people. Subjects participated in a test to show whether punishment helped in learning. Whenever a 'student' (actually an actor), answered a question incorrectly, the subject was told to give him a more powerful electric shock. 65 percent of subjects could be pressured into giving the maximum charge, despite the student's 'screams'.



Photos from Auschwitz reveal that, despite their work, SS guards were often amused and relaxed.

US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

isolated himself more and more from his wife, Hedwig, but still found time to play with his children and occasionally take them for a walk along the nearby river.

In autumn 1942, Himmler ordered that there must be no evidence left of the Nazis' mass executions. In Auschwitz, this meant that 107,000 corpses that had previously been thrown into mass graves outside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp had to be dug up and cremated in the open. For months huge bonfires burned near the camp.

"During bad weather or when a strong wind was blowing, the stench of burning flesh was carried for many miles and caused the entire area to talk about the burning of Jews, despite official counter-propaganda," wrote Höss, who oversaw the macabre task.

"For hours I had to stand in the horrible, haunting stench while the mass graves were dug open, and the bodies were dragged out and burned."

However, the number of Jewish transports into the camp didn't diminish, and Höss had to commission four new, state-of-the-art crematoriums, which were built by the Jewish slave labourers. In the new buildings, the whole murderous process was to be carried out under one roof with special rooms for undressing and gassing, with direct access to the huge crematorium furnaces. The mass murder had now been completely industrialised. Hundreds of thousands of human beings walked in, but nothing but smoke and ash came out.

Inspector of the KZ camps

By 1943, Auschwitz had become a death factory; Höss's work was complete. In the winter, he was offered the position of head of the central administration of the camps which, after some hesitation, he accepted. Höss's new office was just outside Berlin, but at his own request, his family stayed in the villa.

From the sidelines, Höss was able to keep abreast of the activities at Auschwitz. In the spring of 1944, he coordinated the transport of Hungarian Jews to the camp, where they were murdered with shocking efficiency. In just eight weeks the new camp commandant, under Höss's supervision, managed to gas 320,000 Jews.

The speed at which they were killed proved Höss's organisational talent and marked the fastest 'processing' rate at Auschwitz. By autumn 1944, it was clear the Nazis would lose the war, and Himmler ordered an end to the gassing at Auschwitz. In January 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp. It was liberated by the Red Army shortly afterwards.

After a year on the run, in March 1946 Rudolf Höss was captured by British soldiers near the village of Gottrupel, near Flensburg on the Danish border, where he was working on a farm under the name of Franz Lang. At first, he refused to reveal his true identity, but after a beating, the mass murderer eventually confessed.

Höss surprised everyone

During the ensuing trial, Rudolf Höss apologised to his wife, the church, the Polish nation and anybody else who would listen. Those who interrogated him expected to see a monster but instead met a man who seemed calm and perfectly normal.



HOLOCAUST EDUCATION & ARCHIVE RESEARCH TEAM

Bernard Clarke, the officer who censored Höss's letters to his family noted that Höss apparently contained two very different persons: "One was brutal with no regard for human life. The other was soft and affectionate."

Gustave Gilbert, the American military psychologist who interrogated Höss after the war, wrote: "In all of the discussions, Höss is quite matter-of-fact and apathetic, shows some belated interest in the enormity of his crime, but gives the impression that it never would have occurred to him if somebody hadn't asked him."

On 16th April 1947, Commandant Rudolf Höss was hanged at Auschwitz – he was the last person executed at the camp. It's possible that as he prepared to meet his end where he himself had murdered over a million people, he was thinking about the letter he had written to his wife shortly before being led to his place of execution. In it, the former camp commandant wrote:

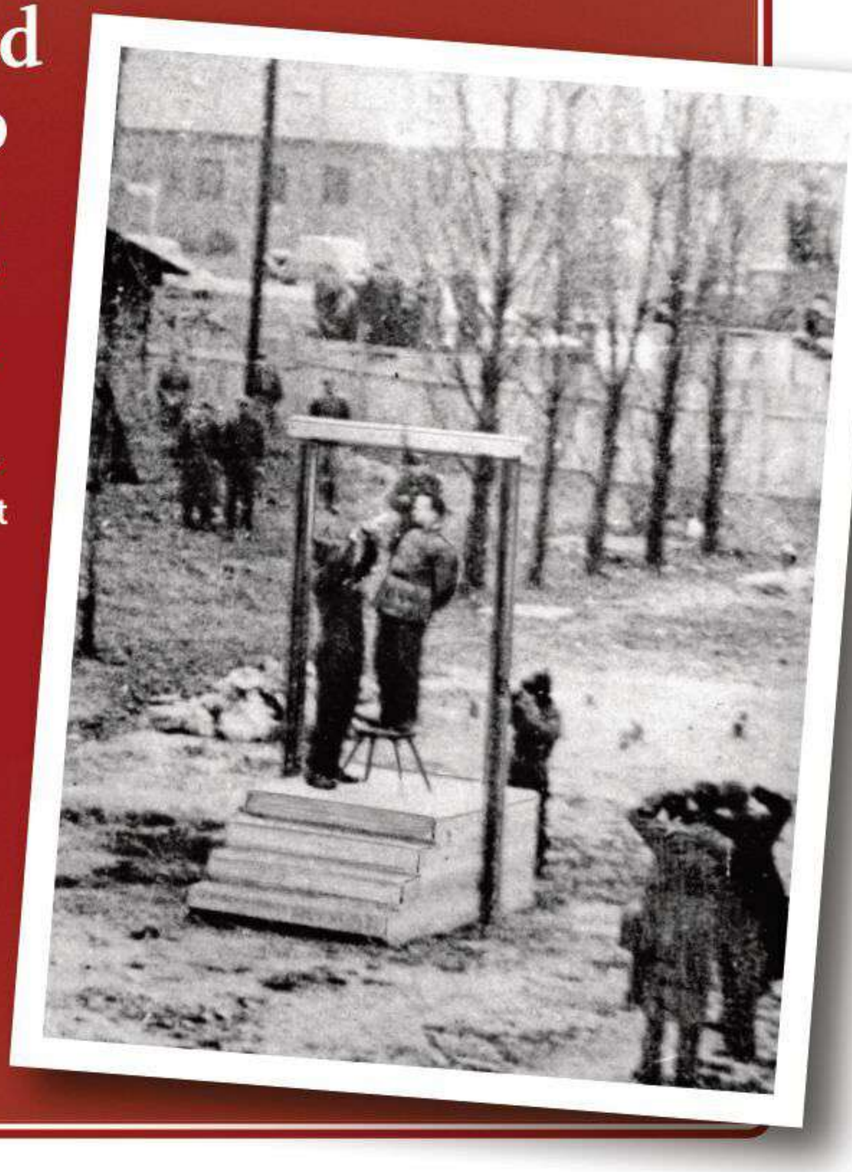
"It is tragic that, although I was by nature gentle, good-natured, and very helpful, I became the greatest destroyer of human beings who carried out every order to exterminate people no matter what."

Höss was hanged in his own camp

After his capture, Rudolf Höss was extradited to the Polish authorities who sentenced him to death. In a letter to his children, he wrote that they should always remember to be critical and learn from life: "The biggest mistake of my life was that I believed everything faithfully which came from the top."

In April 1947, Höss was driven to Auschwitz, where the Poles had built a gallows near the villa where he had lived. His last request was a cup of coffee.

Rudolf Höss apologised to the Polish people before being hanged.


DPA/POLFOTO

1940

9TH APRIL

KATYN MASSACRE

SOVIET DICTATOR SLAUGHTERED POLISH OFFICERS

In spring 1940, packed trains transported captured Polish officers from prison camps to the Katyn Forest. Three or four times a day Poles would arrive and three or four times a day shots and screams echoed through the trees. Three years later, the Germans uncovered thousands of bodies: proof of a gruesome war crime.

In spring 1943 the Germans unearthed the bodies of thousands of executed Polish officers in the Katyn Forest.

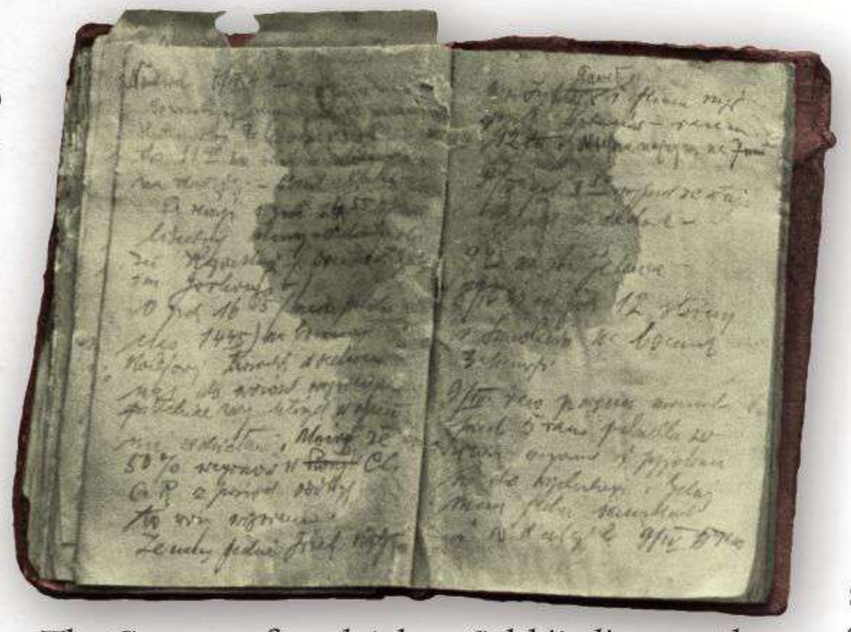
Katyn, 1940

THE STAGE IS SET



In the spring of 1940, several thousand Polish officers are interned in Soviet prison camps after the Red Army's invasion of eastern Poland the previous year. Stalin hopes that the officers can be converted to Communism, but when his plan fails, the dictator's head of security suggests eliminating them instead.

Major Adam Solski could barely move. He was in a train packed with Polish army officers. 36 hours earlier, they had left their prison camp in Kozelsk in Russia and now they were jammed together on a train heading west. Few had slept during the night and those who had jerked awake when the train halted at a siding in Gnezdovo near Smolensk, around 150 km from Kozelsk.



The Germans found Adam Solski's diary on the officer's body after it was exhumed in 1943.

As the clock approached 05.00 on 9th April 1940, Red Army soldiers knocked on the carriage doors and signalled that the Poles should get ready to leave the train. The 45-year-old major scribbled a note in a small makeshift diary he kept hidden under his jacket: "We are to go somewhere by car. What next?"

Chains rattled as the prisoners' stood in the carriage, and the major moved off stiffly with around 100 other Poles into one of several parked lorries. The Russian soldiers shoved the prisoners one at a time into small cell-like cubicles in the back of the trucks. The Poles were jolted around as the lorries travelled a few kilometres along bumpy dirt roads to a forested area where some buildings stood among the trees.

"From dawn the day started in a special way," Solski wrote on arrival. "Taken somewhere into a wood, something like a country house. Here a special search. I was relieved of my watch, pointing to 6.30 am, asked about a wedding ring. Roubles, belt and pocket knife taken away."

These were the last words Solski wrote. Shortly afterwards, a Russian executioner put a 7.65-mm bullet through the nape of the Pole's neck. The corpse was then dumped, along with the hidden diary, into a mass grave. The execution was not the Soviets' first, and nor would it be their last.

Stalin's massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest – 400 kilometres west of Moscow – had just begun.

One in ten Polish soldiers belonged to the cavalry during the Russian invasion of Poland.

Soviets held 15,000 Poles in camps

Eight months before the Soviets murdered Solski, German troops had invaded Poland. Germany and the Soviet Union had recently signed a secret non-aggression pact to divide Poland between them, so Stalin wasn't alarmed when Hitler invaded Western Poland on 1st September 1939.

The Germans were equally unperturbed when the Red Army crossed the Polish-Soviet border on 17th September to grab the Soviet Union's slice of the country. Stalin explained to the world that the invasion was necessary for security reasons and those in power in Paris and London chose to accept his reasoning. Meanwhile T-34 tanks rolled rapidly forward and after a few weeks the Poles were forced to disarm.

Like many other Polish soldiers, Solski had headed towards Hungary in the hopes of avoiding capture by the Red Army. But the major's flight ended in failure, and along with other Polish troops who'd attempted to flee, he found himself in the back of a Russian military truck heading for a prison camp in the East. The Russians took over 100,000 prisoners of war, but they only detained officers – the determination of rank being made by camp doctors . Stalin viewed the Polish officer class as dangerous and they were quickly

Officers and police in the camps

	Kozelsk camp	Ostashkov camp	Starobielsk camp	TOTAL
Officers	999	-	1,348	2,347
NCOs	3,480	-	2,527	6,007
Ordinary	5	72	-	77
Officials	61	-	5	66
Prison officers	-	189	-	189
Chaplains	8	5	9	22
Police officers	-	5.987	-	5,987
Other	46	111	4	161
TOTAL	4,599	6,364	3,893	**14,856**

* The table shows the number of Polish officers and policemen in the three Soviet prison camps in the spring of 1940. The number of deaths has not been verified, but the majority of prisoners in the camps were probably executed.

Victims of Katyn were extremely well preserved because the bodies were buried while it was cold.

Polish cavalry fought on foot

It was a popular myth that Polish cavalry attacked tanks. In fact, the cavalry worked as scouts or infantry who dismounted and fought on foot.



1 The square CZAPKA (cap) was traditionally worn by Polish troopers.



The crested Polish eagle adorned the hat.



An officer's rank was indicated by stars on the hat and shoulders. Three stars indicated colonel.



2 The War Order of Virtuti Militari was awarded for bravery or given to officers for leadership.



3 Spurs were found with other uniform items among the Katyn massacre victims.



The colour of both the collar insignia and hat band showed the officer's regiment.

The khaki uniform was standard for Polish army officers.

The riding crop was helpful to get the horse to behave, but also symbolised power and could be used to quickly punish subordinates.

The insignia on the left breast pocket showed the officer's current and former regiments.

UNIFORMS

shipped off to three special camps in Kozelsk, Starobielsk and Ostashkov. The NKVD – the Soviet Union's feared security police – managed the camps, and as cold weather set in during November 1939, detainees and arrested officers arrived on a daily basis to start their lives behind barbed wire. Over 8,000 officers – half the entire Polish officer corps – ended up there. Many of them were drawn from the reserve forces, whose numbers were made up from those normally employed in civilian professions, such as doctors, lawyers, professors and priests. By interning the reserve officers, the NKVD could stifle Poland's intelligentsia and social elite, thereby reducing the risk of rebellion and anti-Communist resistance.

High-ranking officials and thousands of Polish police officers also found themselves in the camps, which in the autumn of 1939 accommodated nearly 15,000 people. The conditions in the camp were harsh, but the prisoners weren't made to work as the Russians in the special camps respected the international law that decreed officers should not be subject to forced labour during captivity. At first, the prisoners received adequate food rations and could write letters home,

"Apply the highest level of punishment – shooting"

Lavrentiy Beria in a memo to Joseph Stalin, 5th March 1940

even if the mail was censored. But once the biting frost set in, the captives began to realise how difficult life in the camps would be. Stanisław Swianiewicz was one of the few to survive Katyn, and later wrote:

"Accommodation was still cramped, there was not enough room to sleep and a great shortage of laundry facilities. Lice, that plague of Russian life, continued to torment the prisoners."

Inmates complained about everything from the constant squealing of the camp's pigs to the food. According to one inmate, "the standard daily fare was two servings of very thin soup, often with bits of rotten fish, rarely meat, and two small rations of soggy black bread". Yet Solski and his fellow prisoners passed the time in the belief that at some point they'd be released and wave goodbye to the disease and hunger. But the Russians had different plans.

NKVD CHIEF SUGGESTED MASS EXECUTION

Back in 1939, the NKVD's supreme leader, Lavrentiy Beria, had hoped that Polish prisoners of war could be 're-educated' to accept Soviet ideology. Daily propaganda films were shown to the Poles, but in March 1940 Beria suddenly gave up on the idea. Instead, the security chief declared that, "Every one of them is only waiting for his release to be able to enter actively in the struggle against Soviet power."

"Examine them as a matter of urgency, with the application of the highest measure of punishment – shooting", Beria urged Stalin in a memo on 5th March, and the dictator was happy to trust his security chief's judgement.

Nearly 15,000 Poles in Kozelsk, Starobielsk and Ostashkov now had a death sentence hanging over their heads. Beria's death list also included more than 7,000 Poles in Belarusian and Ukrainian prisons. Only a few hundred non-Polish prisoners were to be spared.

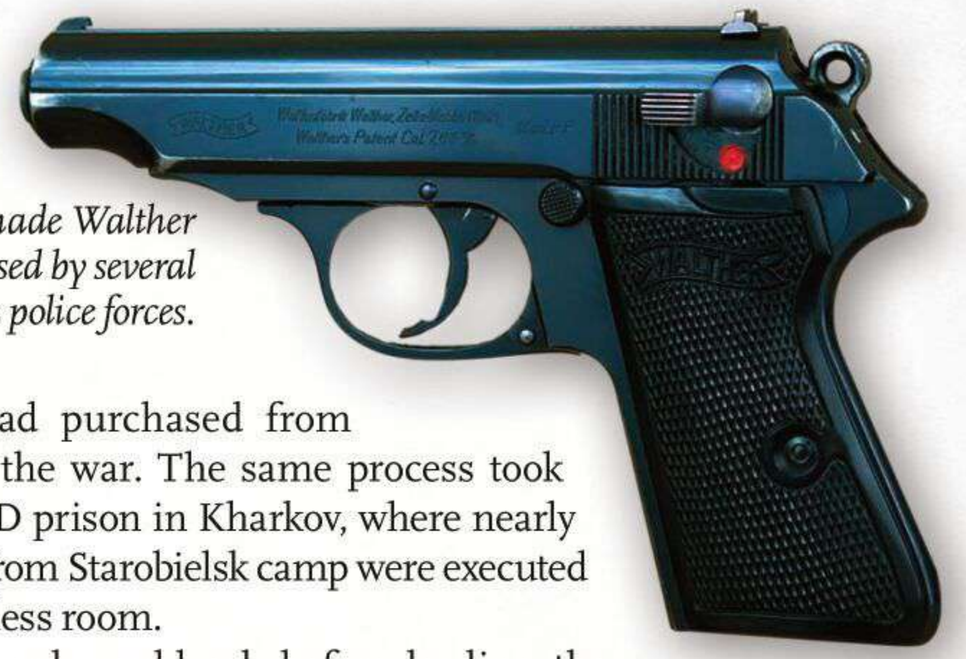
In Kozelsk, Solski had no idea of the Russians' plans, although guards were following camp protocols to an unusual degree. Some were suddenly nicer than usual, too – and the improving weather helped to lift spirits.

"March 1940 was a joyful month in the Kozelsk camp," Swianiewicz wrote. "It became known that the Soviet authorities had come to some decision regarding the closing-down of Kozelsk camp. Here nobody knew the plan, but everybody expected a change for the better."

On 3rd April, the first group of prisoners left. Most of the camp took this as a positive sign. On 7th April, around 700 of Kozelsk camp's 4,500 prisoners had left when Major Solski got the message he had been waiting for: "We have been ordered to pack up our things." Before departure the Poles were handed three herrings in grey paper and some bread for the journey. Solski also noted his departure: "At 14.55 we left the walls and the wires of the Kozelsk camp... At 16.55 at the Kozelsk railway siding, we were put into prison trucks."

OFFICERS' LIVES ENDED IN SLAUGHTERHOUSES

The hope of returning home, however, died when the prisoners disembarked the train at Gnezdovo. They were greeted by barking dogs and Soviet soldiers with bayonets on their rifles. Waiting lorries took them to a large NKVD complex in the Katyn Forest. There, the Polish prisoners were examined a final time before being escorted to a building and shot from behind with a Walther 7.65 mm pistol, which the Soviet regime had purchased from Germany before the war. The same process took place in the NKVD prison in Kharkov, where nearly 4,000 prisoners from Starobielsk camp were executed in a dark windowless room.



The German-made Walther pistol was used by several European police forces.

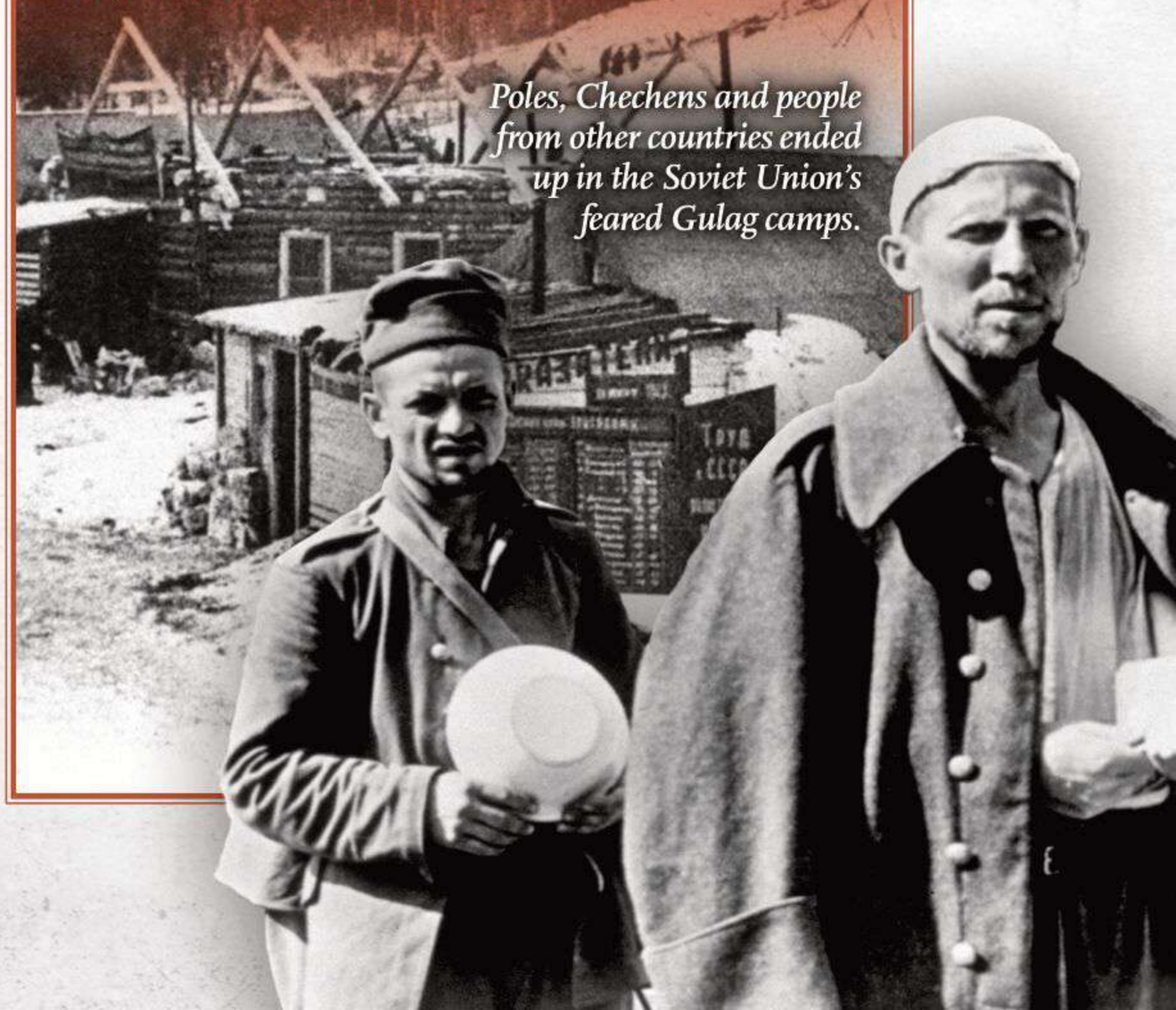
"May I?" A guard would ask before leading the prisoner into the dark room. "There was a clack and that was the end," NKVD officer Mitrofan Syromiatnikov revealed many years after the war. He also reported how, after the murders, the Soviets pulled the Poles' jackets over their heads before they were dragged away, to avoid bloodstains smearing the floor. In Ostashkov an orchestra played music to encourage more than 6,000 prisoners during their departure from the prison camp, but those who were

Deportations and killings eliminated unwanted groups

Although the Katyn massacre was in a class of its own, Stalin frequently used 'cleansing' as a method of getting rid of undesirable elements.

In 1940-41 large groups from Soviet-annexed territories in Poland, Romania and the Baltic countries were killed or deported to the Gulag camps in Siberia. Some of the 'anti-Soviet elements' in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were put in front of firing squads for refusing to back Communist candidates in restricted elections.

When the Red Army retook areas of the Caucasus and Kalmykia, more than 160,000 people were sent to Siberia on charges of collaborating with the Germans. And in February 1944, a special force of 120,000 men was sent to the city of Grozny to monitor the expulsion of people from Chechnya and Ingushetia. In just over a week 478,479 people were deported.



Poles, Chechens and people from other countries ended up in the Soviet Union's feared Gulag camps.

1899-1953

NAME **LAVRENTIY BERIA**

TITLE HEAD OF THE NKVD

Georgian was Stalin's executioner

In 1938, Joseph Stalin brought Lavrentiy Beria from his birthplace in Georgia to Moscow. The Soviet dictator had noticed the Georgian's talent for purging political opponents and put him at the head of the security police, the NKVD. Beria planned and carried out acts of political terrorism during the last 15 years of Stalin's regime.



- **Headed up atomic bomb project.**
- **Was executed in 1953.**

transported to the prison in Tver shared the same fate as those in Kharkov and Katyn: summary execution.

In Tver, chief executioner Vasily Blokhin already had the deaths of thousands of peasants and workers on his conscience. Over several nights during the spring of 1940 Blokhin shot almost 300 Poles, dressed in an apron, long gloves and a leather cap to shield himself from the blood and bodily fluids. In Kharkov and Tver the Russians drove bodies away at night in closed trucks and dumped them in graves outside the cities. In Katyn, Beria's NKVD complex lay in the woods, and it was only a short trip to eight mass graves hidden among the trees.

After the Kozelsk camp massacre of around 4,500 Poles was over, the Russians scooped sand and earth over the bodies before the soldiers planted small birch trees over them. The tracks were erased – or so the Russians thought. But Katyn's secret would be unearthed just three years later.

Nazis found the mass graves

On a frosty January day in 1943 Colonel Friedrich Ahrens of the Wehrmacht was wandering in the Katyn Forest, which had fallen into German hands after Hitler broke the pact with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. Suddenly, a wolf appeared among the trees. Following the tracks later with an expert, Ahrens came across a mound where the ground had been disturbed.

"One could see that they were graves and that the wolf had been digging for bones," Ahrens later reported. "I had investigations made as to what kind of bones these were. The doctors told me 'human bones'."

The colonel immediately contacted Berlin, and in late February, with help from locals, the Germans began to dig up the frost-hard ground. After the first bodies began to appear, local farmers were quick to explain how the corpses came to be in the ground. One such witness, Parfeon Kisselev, reported that over a period of

"Bodies lie like sardines in layers"

Diary entry by Coroner Helge Tramsen

Local Soviet citizens helped the Germans exhume the bodies in Russia's Katyn Forest.

four or five weeks in the spring of 1940, prisoners were brought in three or four times a day, and that he regularly heard shots and cries from his home.

The massacre in Katyn was convenient for Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. "We shall be able to live on it for a couple of weeks", he wrote in mid-April. Goebbels sent a commission of 12 independent European forensic experts to Katyn to examine the bodies and deny accusations that the Germans had staged the discovery of the graves.

The bodies were well preserved because the Russians had buried the victims while conditions were still relatively cold, so no flies and maggots had come to devour the victims. Despite this, Danish coroner Helge Tramsen confided to his diary that they still smelled disgusting. He further noted that, "[the bodies] lie like sardines stacked in layers, with their heads in the same direction. Everyone is lying on his stomach with his arms twisted back and skulls shot back."

The graves also contained Polish uniforms, diaries, letters and military passes, allowing more than half the bodies to be identified – among them Major Adam Solski. The commission concluded that the Poles had been massacred, and Goebbels filmed the exhumation to be broadcast in cinemas throughout German-occupied Europe.

The Nazi's joy was short-lived, however, for the discovery of bullets in the Katyn graves revealed that the massacre had been carried out using German-made Walther 7.65-mm pistols.

"It is essential that the incident remains a top secret", wrote Goebbels in May 1943, but the news was impossible to hide. The Minister had to acknowledge the situation a few months later when the Germans were forced to withdraw from the area.

"Unfortunately we have had to give up Katyn. The Bolsheviks undoubtedly will soon 'find' that we shot 12,000 Polish officers." His prediction proved accurate.

Soviets denied responsibility

The Germans hadn't finished digging up all the bodies in the Katyn Forest before the sound of Russian tanks approached Smolensk. Quickly, the Germans had to cover the graves and retreat, and the NKVD took control of the area in a bid to destroy and remove the remaining evidence. Then the Russians planted new trees and forbade civilians to enter the area.

As Goebbels predicted, the Soviet government went on the offensive. During the Nuremberg trials, the Russians demanded that the Katyn massacre be classed as a German war crime, masterminded by Colonel Ahrens. The Russians' 'proof' was the German cartridge cases and bullets found at the scene. In addition, the NKVD forced a Bulgarian member of the Commission to bear false witness: if the doctor did not support the Soviet accusations, he would be executed.

"In my opinion these corpses were buried for a shorter period of time than three years", he duly testified, insinuating that the deaths had occurred while Katyn was in Nazi hands.

Neither the cartridges nor the doctor's statement was enough to pin the blame on the Germans, however. The Katyn incident disappeared from the list of crimes heard at the Nuremberg. No verdict was reached, and no one was ever held to account for the deaths of those 22,000 Poles who, like Adam Solski, ended up buried en masse in the Soviet Union's frozen ground.

PERSPECTIVE

Massacre faded into obscurity

For 50 years the Soviets prevented any investigation of the slaughter in the Katyn Forest, where around 4,600 Polish prisoners of war were executed.

Although the Soviet Union denied being behind the Katyn slaughter after World War II, the regime's responsibility for the massacre was quickly confirmed. A US committee that had interviewed members from the International 1943 Commission ruled in 1952 that the murders could only have been carried out when the Katyn Forest was in Soviet hands.

Despite the damning evidence, the Soviet Union stubbornly continued to deny responsibility for the massacre until 1990-91, when the outside world gained access to secret Soviet documents that the KGB had kept hidden for nearly 50 years. The Russians, however, refused to hand over other documents about the massacre, including its own internal investigations into the matter, so the exact death toll is still unknown.

In 2010, politicians in the Russian parliament adopted a resolution that the secret documents "showed that the Katyn crime was carried out on the direct orders of Stalin and other Soviet officials". Russians continue to refer to the incident as a 'political crime' while Poland insists that the Katyn massacre was outright genocide.



Reich Health Leader Leonardo Conti received a report on the Katyn massacre in 1943.

VENGEANCE

JEWS FOUGHT BACK AGAINST THE NAZIS

Their family was murdered by the Nazis, and they came close to being captured themselves. But three Jewish brothers refused to die and instead formed one of Poland's most-feared resistance groups, saving 1,140 lives in the process.

BY ANTJE GERD POULSEN & NIELS-PETER GRANZOW BUSCH

Zus Bielski

Asael Bielski



BIELSKI PARTISANS

Over the course of three years, the number of Bielski Jewish partisans grew from under one hundred to over 1,100 people.

USHMM/MOSHE KAGANOVICH & YAD VASHEM



Poland/June 1941

Poland annexes western Belarus after WWI. The Russians take revenge when they occupy Belarus and eastern Poland in 1939. The biggest disaster for the Jews, however, comes in June 1941 when Hitler sends three million troops across the border.

On a dark January evening in 1943, a group of armed men approached a small house on the outskirts of the Polish hamlet of Abelkevitch. At the doorstep, one man raised his arm and knocked hard on the door. He was wearing a red armband on which a black Swastika had been drawn.

"Why all the noise? I'm coming," a voice shouted from inside the house.

Shortly after, a middle-aged man opened the door, glanced briefly at the mens' armbands, and ushered them in.

"How are things going?" asked one of the strangers, looking at the man.

"We are alive and we are killing Jews," he replied smiling.

"We are also catching Jews," the stranger replied coldly, before continuing. "But I want to know why you are dragging your feet? So many Jews are on the roads. Why haven't you captured more than you have?"

The house's occupant looked at the men uncertainly: "I've nabbed plenty," he replied. "A few days ago I turned in two women, two children and two men… I took them to the police station. A few weeks ago, I found, I think, 11 people."

The man's wife and son, who had come to see what the commotion was about, nodded approvingly.

"He is our man," said the stranger to one of his companions, a large man sporting a lavish moustache who had been silent up until that point. "See what immense work he has accomplished."

The big man nodded briefly. Suddenly the mask fell away and his face was filled with loathing: "But how are you able to do it? How can a man with a conscience turn over people that will be killed?"

The householder's eyes were filled with pleading: "What do you mean, sir? It is the law. We have to obey the law."

"Do you know who I am?" The first stranger said, before answering his own question: "I am a Jew."

A second later, he punched the man in the face and ordered the family to lie down on the floor. The visitors' faces showed no emotion as they cocked their rifles and strafed bullets through the three convulsing bodies on the floor.

"The family was killed. No living soul was left, not even a cat or a dog," the group's leader – the powerful man with the moustache – wrote in his diary 10 years after the end of World War II.

His name was Tuvia Bielski: a Polish Jew who, during the war, put together one of the area's most feared partisan groups and saved hundreds of Jews from the Nazi massacres.

Bielski stood up to thieves

Tuvia Bielski was the second-oldest of 11 children. His family had moved to the village of Stankevich (modern-day Stankiewicze) in the Belarusian region of tsarist Russia in the late 1800s, where the Jewish family leased a mill. It was a hard life, but the family were able to put food on the table.

Anti-Semitism was rife in the region, and shortly after the Bielskis arrived in Stankevich, the Tsar banned Jews from holding any kind of public office or owning property. The future looked bleak for the Bielskis, but fortunately their father David Bielski came to an arrangement with a neighbour to take on the mill's deeds in name only, allowing them to keep the property and thus the family's livelihood.

After two years of fighting for control of the country, Poland gained all of western Belarus in 1921, including the Bielski family's village. The Poles turned out to be worse than the Russians, and the Jews found themselves taunted daily. However, the locals soon learned not to meddle with Tuvia Bielski. When some peasants stole part of the Bielski family's supply of hay, the 13-year-old boy confronted them fearlessly, but the thieves laughed at him: "Run home, or I'll give you a beating."

Tuvia did go home and fetched back two of his younger brothers, Asael (aged 11) and Zus (seven). The brothers returned to the scene and immediately attacked one of the

"We are alive and are killing Jews"

Polish informer to a group of Jewish partisans.

Brothers couldn't trust anyone

Poland had more Jews than any other European country, and in the western part of Belarus, which was under Polish rule, Jews made up about 50 percent of the population of its major towns and cities.

The Jewish population's religion and customs, which differed significantly from that of the gentiles, created widespread anti-Semitism. It hadn't helped that some Jews had welcomed the Soviets when they occupied Belarus and eastern Poland in 1939. When the Germans invaded in 1941, Jews felt their non-Jewish compatriots could be both friends and enemies. Among those the Bielski brothers feared were:

- **German Einsatzgruppen units**, whose primary goal was to hunt Jews.
- **Polish police**, who actively cooperated with the Nazis.
- **Polish partisan groups**, many of whom considered the Jews traitors.
- **Ordinary Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles and Lithuanians**, who informed on Jews for religious, political or financial reasons.
- **Russian partisans**, many of whom were anti-Semitic.

peasants with a scythe. The boys missed their target, but nevertheless, the brothers' rage and readiness to fight frightened the peasants so much that they fled. When another peasant tried to steal the family's hay, Tuvia beat him in full view of the thieve's gang. From then on, no one touched the Bielskis' hay.

Hitler betrays the Soviets

In 1939, when Tuvia was 33 years old, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Poland between them, and within a few weeks the Soviets had annexed eastern Poland and western Belarus. Many Jews initially welcomed the regime change, but their joy was brief. First, Jews were prohibited from speaking Yiddish, and then all Zionist organisations were banned.

Tuvia became a bookkeeper, while Zus and Asael Bielski were drafted into the Red Army in early 1941. A few months later, on 22nd June 1941, disaster struck in the form of three million German soldiers. The Nazis invaded all Soviet-occupied territory in the east and left a shattered Red Army in its wake. Tuvia was in the city of Luda, 160 km west of Minsk, when the German planes arrived: "The fear and panic was unbelievable, and there was catastrophe in the air, a sense of doom," he later wrote.

Both Tuvia and his brothers were mobilised in the Soviet army, but after just half a day's fighting it was clear that everything was lost.

"Comrades, it's every man for himself," roared Tuvia's commander who promptly vanished. Tuvia stashed his weapon and went home to Stankevich, disguised as a farmer.

Father, mother and brothers were murdered

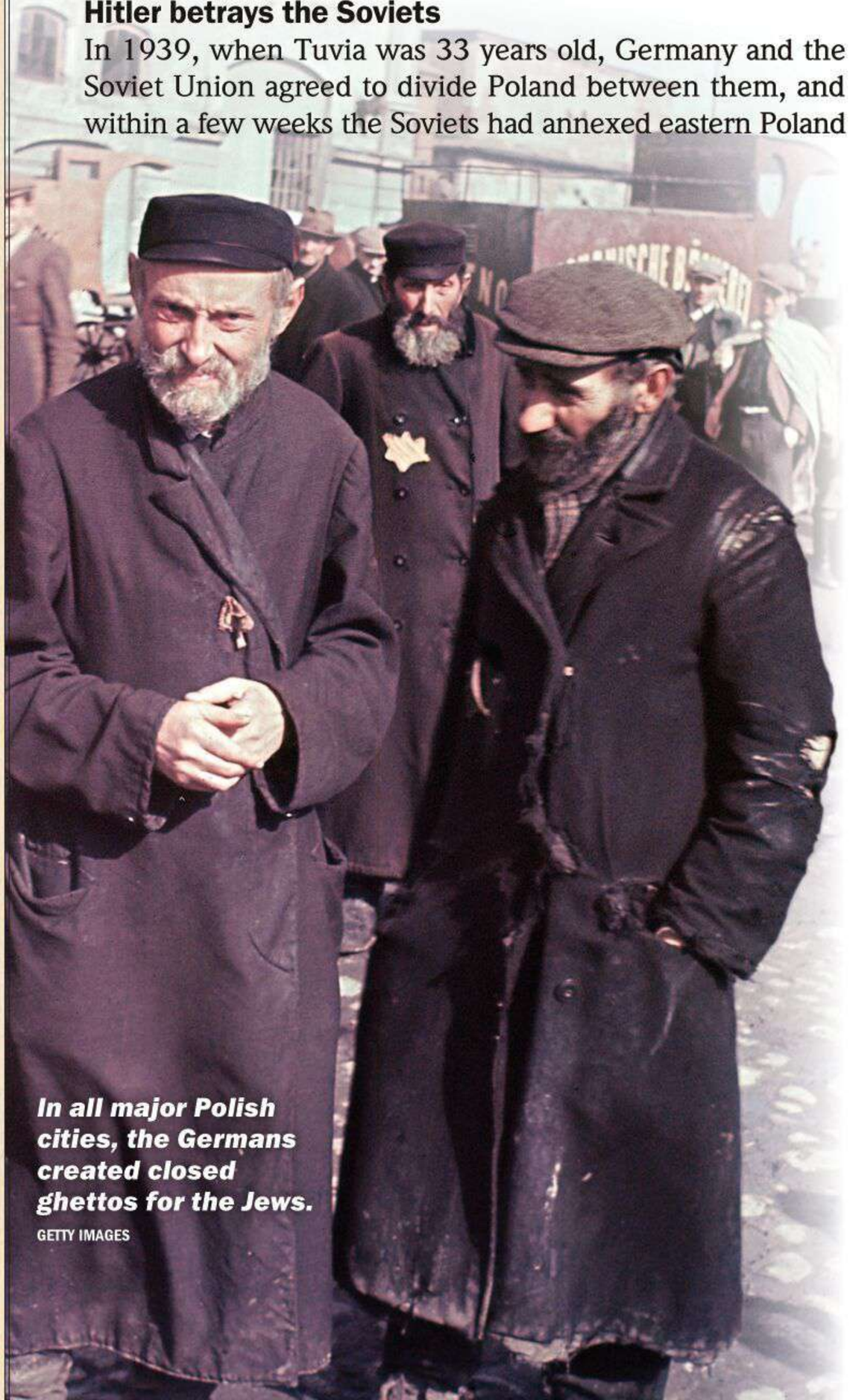
When Tuvia reached his parents' mill, he was reunited with Asael and Zus, who had also returned home. In order not to attract attention to the mill, the three brothers decided to live in the woods surrounding the family home.

However, Zus regularly travelled to the neighbouring city of Novogrudok (modern-day Navahrudak) to visit his young wife. During one of his visits, he witnessed a scene he would never forget. In the central square of the city, The Germans had gathered a large group of Jews together into five rows, guarded by local police and German troops. Suddenly, the soldiers opened fire on the first row who fell to the ground. Then the scene repeated itself over and over with subsequent rows. Zus saw a small Jewish boy in the final row look at his father in horror: "Father, they are killing us," the boy whispered.

The last volley of shots rang out. None of the region's Jews were left in any doubt what fate awaited them.

Soon after, some of the Bielski family's neighbours informed the Germans that the three Bielski brothers were hiding in the woods. A group of Polish police officers showed up at the mill and searched the forest. The brothers had received advanced warning and were nowhere in sight. Instead, the officers arrested their two younger brothers, Abraham and Yakov. None of the family's pleas for clemency were heard, and a few weeks later the family was informed that Abraham and Yakov had been shot during an escape attempt.

The family barely had time to process the loss before German soldiers arrived in December 1941 to pick up their parents and drive them away in a truck with thousands of other Jews from the area, including Zus's wife and their young baby. A few days later, the detained Jews were taken into the forest and forced to take off their clothes. Shaking from the cold, the Jews were lined up at the edge of two 40-metre-long mass graves, after which they were mowed down with



In all major Polish cities, the Germans created closed ghettos for the Jews.

GETTY IMAGES

machine guns. By the end of the day, 4,000 had died, including the senior Bielskis, their daughter-in-law and granddaughter.

Revenge must wait

After the tragedy in Novogrudok, Zus, Asael and Tuvia met with their younger brother Aron. Fuelled by grief and a desire for vengeance, they acquired a few weapons and formed a partisan group. During the first months of 1942 they brought more family members into the forest, including their sister Taibe, Tuvia's wife and cousin Yehuda.

Soon, a dozen people lived in a camp of improvised shelters made from wooden branches. On nightly excursions they received or stole food from local farmers. Zus and Asael wanted to take immediate reprisals against the Germans, but Tuvia prioritised the saving of lives. In his camp everyone would be welcome – including children, the elderly and the sick: "I'd rather save one old Jewish woman than kill 10 Nazi soldiers," he explained to his followers.

Revenge would have to wait. When camp residents chose Tuvia as the leader, the brothers complied with his wishes.



On the Eastern Front, the German troops waged a brutal war against the local partisans, who were hanged in public as a warning.

YAD VASHEM

Meanwhile, the Nazis had established ghettos in Novogrudok and Lida as well as conducting several more mass murders. In May 1942, 5,500 Jews from Lida were massacred, and further atrocities swiftly followed in other cities where more than 7,000 lost their lives. Convinced that the mass murders were far from over, Tuvia organised an escape route for Jews from the nearby ghettos. As the group in the woods grew, Tuvia realised they needed more supplies and weapons, but only a few of the Polish peasants had the courage to help them. That's when the brothers decided to switch to terror tactics.

At night, the partisans surrounded local farms and threatened the peasants to help them. Several times Zus would take a peasant's son out of sight, fire a shot up in the air

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE OF AUSTRIAN RESISTANCE

Death squads shot 33,000 Jews in two days

Hot on the heels of the German army's eastern advance in 1941, four Einsatzgruppen followed with approximately 3,000 men. Their task was to hunt and execute Jews. Often, they were eagerly assisted by locals.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Bielski family and all other Jewish families in Eastern Europe became hunted. Behind the front, German death squads worked to murder as many Jews as possible.

On 29th and 30th September 1941, Einsatzgruppe C executed 33,771 Jews at the Babi Yar Gorge near Ukraine's capital of Kiev. The Jews were lured under the pretence of being moved, but when the many thousands of Jews reached the gorge the terrified men, women and children were forced to take off all their clothes and lay on top of the bodies of the dead. Then the squads shot them in the back of the head: "I saw these marksmen stand on the layers of corpses and shoot one after the other," a Ukrainian truck driver testified after the war.

Other German units involved in carrying out the massacre included special SS units as well as local Ukrainian collaborators.

Just a month later, Einsatzgruppe C executed another 19,000 Jews in the city of Odessa, and on 20th November, Einsatzgruppe B's commander, former Kripo (Criminal Police) chief Arthur Nebe, proudly reported that since the beginning of the campaign, his troops had executed 45,467 people in the Polish part of Belarus, where the Bielski family had their home.

Einsatzgruppe members were specifically selected for the job, but even the most cold-blooded killers found the slaughter hard on their nerves. After the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, it was decided that in future Jews would be gassed in concentration camps.



All over the East, German death squads executed Jews in their thousands.



In 1944, Russian troops dug up thousands of executed Jews at Babi Yar, Ukraine.

YAD VASHEM

DEATH SQUAD MASSACRE OF JEWS IN EASTERN EUROPE

COUNTRY	DATE	DEATHS
Latvia	June-Nov 1941	137,346
Belarus (Poland)	June-Nov 1941	45,467
Babi Yar, Ukraine	29-30th Sep 1941	33,771
Odessa, Ukraine	23rd Oct 1941	c. 19,000
Rumbula, Latvia	20th Oct 1941	c. 30,000
Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine	1st-28th Feb 1942	c. 29,300

and come back alone: "We've killed one son. Now let's kill another," he would announce to the shocked family.

After that, Zus was immediately given weapons, food and other supplies.

Decapitated and hanged

Soon, Tuvia decided that the time had come for retaliation: "We must think only of one important thing: revenge and revenge again on the murderers," he proclaimed. The Jews had been contacted by a group of Soviet partisans who lived in the area. Despite great suspicion on the part of the Russians, Tuvia convinced their leader that the two groups should cooperate.

On 1st September 1942, the partisans attacked large silos of grain that the Germans had planned to transport to Germany. The silos were set on fire and thousands of tonnes of grain

Bielskis built an industrial hub in the forest

Keen to make Jews an essential part of the relentless fight against the Nazis, the Bielski brothers formed a small industrial community in the forest. Here, Jewish partisans produced everything from weapons to uniforms.

The Naliboki *Pushcha* (Forest) is a large area with swamps and dense tree cover, where the sun rarely penetrates through the leaves to the forest floor. Under cover of the dark forest, the Bielski brothers and their group of partisans built up their biggest camp at the end of 1943 with room for over a thousand inhabitants.

Many Jewish refugees were too old or untrained to wage guerrilla war, and the Jewish partisans' Soviet comrades were extremely critical of the many non-fighting Jews who they felt should fend for themselves. The Bielski brothers therefore ensured that all the Jews in the camp became indispensable. The camp would not only offer refugees housing, but also industry of all kinds. Jews repaired guns in the smithy and metal workshop. Food and supplies were prepared in the bakery and slaughterhouse, while the tannery, tailors and hat makers fashioned uniforms.

When the Soviets' partisan leader came to visit the camp, he was astonished by all the things the Jews could supply. Even new watches and horses were available to the Russians. All the Jews in the camp had regular assignments. Teenage boys lit fireplaces and milked cows. The young girls kept watch. And small groups from the camp were sent out to procure food from the civilian population.

The camp's dwellings were *ziemlankas* – underground bunkers. They consisted of deep holes in the ground, which at the surface were covered with branches and leaves to shield them from the rain and prying eyes.

Nazis feared the deep forests

The Naliboki Forest near the city of Novogrudok was perfect for the Bielski partisans. Their camp could not be seen from the air, and the German soldiers did not dare wander into the wilderness.









Several Polish, Russian and Jewish partisan groups based themselves in the forests. From there, they launched daily attacks on the enemy.

JEWISH VIRTUAL LIBRARY

destroyed. It was a huge success for the two groups, and was followed soon after with bloody ambushes of German patrols.

"We wanted to persuade the anti-Semites who lived in opulence and luxury on the account of our suffering that Hitler's weak prophecy – that a Jew would become something only seen on the movie screen in the cinema – was an outrageous hoax," Tuvia wrote later. His name was now feared all over the local area, and the Germans put a bounty of 10,000 Reichsmark on his head.

In March 1943, Bielski's group numbered over 300 men, women and children. One day, a group of partisans returned from a supply train with a prisoner. Asael Bielski recognised the man. It was one of the Bielski family's neighbours who'd been recruited to the pro-Nazi police force and had helped to hunt the Jews. "One of the fellows then chopped his head off with an axe," Asael later recalled.

Shortly afterwards, the Jews also captured the son of one of the Bielski family's former employees. He had led Lithuanian auxiliaries into the forest to find the brothers' camp. The man begged in vain for his life. Tuvia ordered his men to hang the frightened Pole from a tree.

Ghetto Jews escape from death train

On 17th September 1943, the Jewish ghetto in the city of Lida, near the Bielski camp, was surrounded by German troops. Its two thousand or so Jews were marched to boxcars for transport to the extermination camps.

Among the Jews were 17-year-old Mike Stoll and his sister and father. The family, who knew they were doomed, persuaded a Polish police officer to give them an axe. When the carriage doors were locked, Stoll used the axe to break the grille in front of the carriage's window. While the train was speeding along, Stoll bravely crawled out the window and unlocked the door. Then everyone jumped out.

Shortly afterwards, the Jews found the Bielski partisan camp in the woods. They were among the only Jews to escape the death trains. The other occupants of the train from Lida were gassed a few hours later.

Hitler wanted to crush the partisans

By July 1943, the number of Jewish partisans had swelled to 800 people. And now the Germans launched the biggest offensive against them so far: Operation Hermann. The Nazi's most brutal soldiers were assigned to the operation, including the infamous Dirlewanger Brigade, made up of convicted murderers and rapists. 52,000 soldiers surrounded the forests and executed everyone in their path.

The Jews stood no chance against the enormous force, and Tuvia decided to try and evade the attackers. Carrying no food, the refugees hid in a swamp. After several days they reached a small, hidden island. For nearly two weeks, the Jews remained on the island without food until they could no longer hear gunshots. Against all the odds the Jews had escaped Hitler's most-feared soldiers.

In August 1943, Jewish partisans set up a new camp in the Naliboki Forest. The trees grew densely in the woodlands and the area was full of other partisan groups. Before long, a small village sprang up with houses, workshops and stables. In June 1944, the German troops eventually withdrew from Belarus as they fled the Red Army. The hour of revenge had come.

The Bielski partisans and other groups killed thousands of German refugees who believed they would find shelter in Belarus's deep forests.

The final revenge

One day, the Bielski partisans led four German prisoners into camp. Shortly afterwards, blows and curses rained down on the soldiers. Everyone had lost family and these four German soldiers would be held accountable. For two hours, men, women and children unleashed their fury on the terrified Germans, who tried in vain to convince the attackers they were innocent.

"Look at us, we are Jews! Do you know what you did to us?" one man yelled.

Eventually, the Jews threw the soldiers into an open pit and shot them. A few days later, the war was over. In his final debrief, Tuvia reported that over three years his group had destroyed 34 train cars, blown up 18 bridges and killed 261 soldiers.

The partisans' greatest triumph, however, was the number of lives saved. Thanks to the efforts of the Bielski brothers, in June 1944, 1,140 Jews were able to leave the Naliboki Forest as free people. Tuvia had disproved Hitler: the Bielski brothers' Jews had fought, survived – and prevailed.

Partisans died unknown and penniless

"I'll be famous when I'm dead," Tuvia Bielski said during the war. The partisan leader was right: the Bielski brothers only became known years after their death.

After the war, he and Zus migrated to Israel, where Tuvia became a taxi driver. However, he made virtually no money: "How many times my husband picked up people and wouldn't take a penny," she recalled. In 1955, Tuvia and his wife emigrated to the United States, where Tuvia took a job as a truck driver. He died virtually penniless in 1987. Brother Zus also ended up in the US, where he died in 1995. In his final years he was interviewed about the war but recalled very little. There was one thing the former partisan knew about the Germans, though: "I remember they were bastards."



Tuvia Bielski

Zus and Tuvia Bielski both participated in the Israeli-Arab War in 1948.

YAD VASHEM & WIRTUALNY SZTETL/LESLIE BELL



During the 21 months he spent in Lyon, Klaus Barbie deported 7,591 prisoners and executed 4,342 prisoners.

GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK

FRANCE/1942

Nazi Germany tightens its grip on occupied France as it prepares for an Allied invasion. The Gestapo, Germany's secret state police, is ordered to use brutal methods to crack down on the French Resistance movement.



AFTERMATH: BARBIE WAS HUNTED FOR 38 YEARS

KLAUS BARBIE

THE BUTCHER OF LYON

Red-hot needles, whips and boiling water – Klaus Barbie's sadistic methods knew no limits. Over two years, the Butcher of Lyon tortured thousands of Jews and members of the French Resistance. When the Allies liberated the city, Barbie fled and found a new employer.

BY KASPER SCHLIE

A single incandescent bulb cast a pale light over Suite 68 of Hotel Terminus at Lyon train station. On a wooden chair in the middle of the room, sat Jewish scientist Marcel Gompel. He was the latest victim of Klaus Barbie, the infamous local Gestapo chief. The 29-year-old Nazi had already beaten Gompel with clubs and pushed his head under water until his lungs were bursting. But as the proud Gompel had given the German nothing but an angry scowl, Barbie decided to play his trump cards.

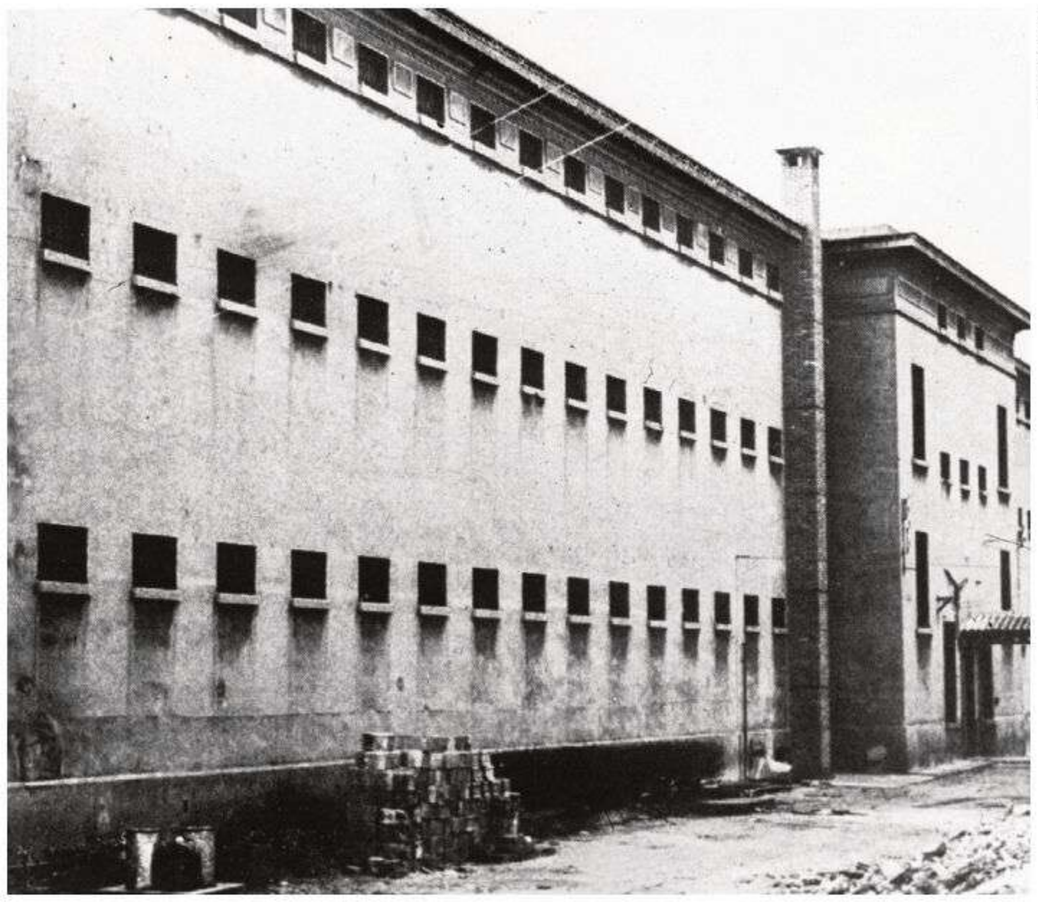
Sadistic methods

An assistant attached chains to the prisoner's ankles and, using a pulley fixed to the ceiling, hoisted Gompel up until he was hanging upside down. The assistant then picked up a scalpel and over several hours peeled off the scientist's skin. Gompel's screams did not reach the street outside.

The prisoner still refused to talk, so Barbie ordered a bathtub to be filled with ammonia and Gompel lowered into it. The scientist screamed and writhed, then when he passed out, Barbie revived him by pouring boiling water onto his mutilated body so that the interrogation could continue. For three days afterwards, Gompel limped among his fellow inmates. The pain was so intense that he could neither sit nor lie down. When he finally died, the prisoners held hands and sang 'La Marseillaise'.

Even the word Gestapo, the name of the Nazi secret police, was enough to bring every Jew and resistance fighter out in a cold sweat. Gestapo agents cared little for the Geneva Convention's rules and used increasingly cruel methods of torture. But in Lyon, one man emerged who was more callous and remorseless in his duties than even Gestapo boss Henrich Himmler could have hoped for. Klaus Barbie was simply the most brutal Gestapo torturer of all.

When Barbie was born in 1913, there was nothing to suggest he would be anything but a regular, lawful citizen.



BRIDGEMAN

Montluc prison, where Klaus Barbie incarcerated thousands of French Resistance members and Jews. The prisoners were taken from the prison to the Terminus Hotel for interrogation.

His parents, Anna and Nikolaus Barbie, were well-liked well-regarded Catholics and respected teachers in the small town of Udler, 60 kilometres south of Bonn. Barbie was perceived by most as a smart, pleasant boy who chatted happily to people.

World War I tore the family apart. His father returned with a hatred for all things French after being held captive in France. Traumatised and with shrapnel in his neck, he took to drowning his memories with alcohol and beating his wife and two sons. It was a relief for Klaus when he was sent to boarding school in Trier in 1923. A diligent and intelligent student, he hoped to study theology at university.

But the events of 1933 dashed his hopes. In the same year that the Nazis took power in Germany, Barbie's



When he wasn't torturing people, Barbie enjoyed Lyon's social scene.

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younger brother died from illness and his father followed soon after. Barbie sank into a deep depression. His plans for an expensive education were dead: he had been born out of wedlock and, in conservative Germany, that meant that he wouldn't inherit a single mark. His future seemed hopeless.

He found his calling

The young and intelligent Barbie soon found a new career path. After two years as a fanatical member of *Hitlerjugend* (the Hitler Youth) he was admitted to the SD – the SS intelligence service – in September 1935. Here, he found his true calling, finding both camaraderie and clearly defined enemies. Over the next few years, Barbie received intense training in police work and in the interrogation techniques required to break any 'enemy of the state'.

From 1940, things moved at a furious pace. In April, Barbie was promoted to SS-Untersturmführer and was married five days later. In May, he was posted to occupied Amsterdam. He threw himself into his work with great energy, constantly

Barbie joins SS intelligence service

In September 1935, the SS intelligence service, the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), decided to hire 22-year-old Klaus Barbie



ALAMY/IMAGESELECT

gathering intelligence. He confined arrested Jews in a newly created ghetto and sent thousands of people by train to the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Mauthausen.

The Gestapo high command was impressed. Barbie was promoted to captain and, in November 1942, sent to Lyon in France to head up the local Gestapo.

Barbie came to kill

For the Nazis, Lyon was a ticking bomb. From the start of the war, Jews, communists and French Resistance fighters had built widespread networks in the city. When Barbie spoke to his subordinates for the first time at the Gestapo's headquarters on the third floor of Hotel Terminus, his

Gestapo was present in all occupied states

The Gestapo torturers terrorised civilian populations throughout Europe. Local officials developed their own methods.

The Gestapo was an extended arm of the German Nazi party, and was governed by Heinrich Himmler. It monitored and fought all those who were thought to pose a threat to the state.

The organisation's 32,000 men worked with terrifying efficiency and during the war years it developed a number of methods to make prisoners talk. "Very simple diet; hard bunk; dark cell; deprivation of sleep; exhaustive drilling; also flogging" was how the Gestapo described the organisation's preferred methods in a secret document dated 12th June 1942.

In reality, the secret police used far more brutal methods to extract information from their enemies, both in Germany itself and in German-occupied territories. Water torture and physical beatings were used everywhere the Gestapo operated in Europe, but some interrogators also developed their own personal techniques.



Deadly ice bath
Norway: Gestapo agent Richard Bruns forced information from prisoners by laying them in an ice bath until they almost froze to death. Bruns was executed in Oslo in 1947.

Whipped with wires
Denmark: In the Gestapo HQ in the Danish capital of Copenhagen, Ib Birkedal bent his suspects over a table and whipped them with wires in an effort to make them talk.

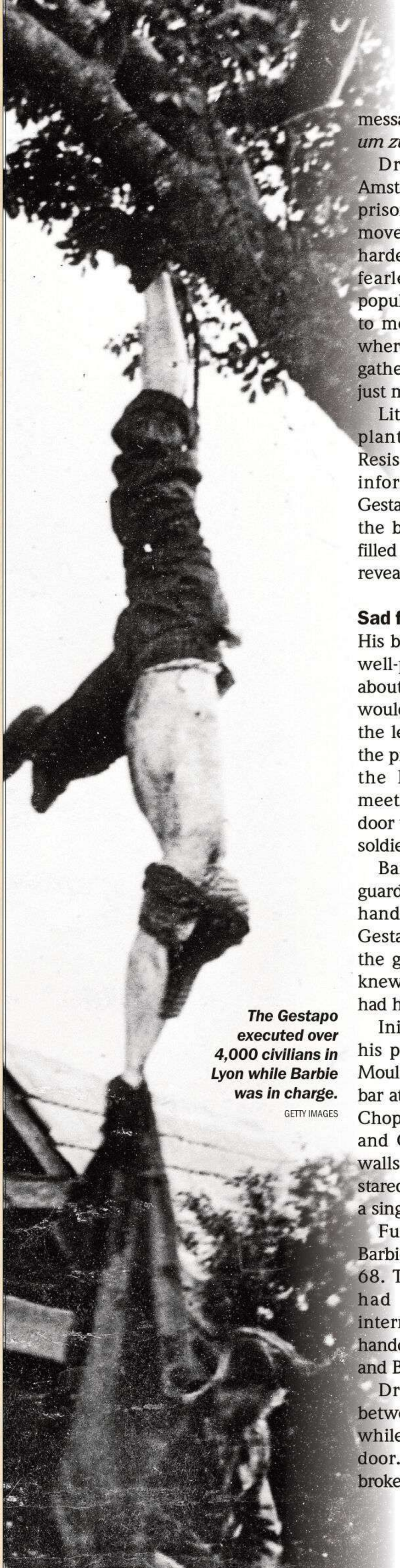
Forced to torture
Poland: The Gestapo ran a large prison in Poland, but did not torture inmates themselves. Instead, non-Jews were forced to beat Jews while the Gestapo watched.

Electrodes in cuts
Belgium: Gestapo agent Max Gunter first cut his prisoners before placing electrodes in the open wounds and turning on the power.

By the balls
The Netherlands: Andries Pieters invented his own methods of torture. He made male prisoners talk by tying string tightly around their genitals.

Klaus Barbie always carried a heavy black cosh.

TIME SLIPS & BRIDGEMAN



The Gestapo executed over 4,000 civilians in Lyon while Barbie was in charge.

GETTY IMAGES

message was clear: *"Ich bin gekommen um zu töten"* ("I came to kill").

Drawing on his experiences in Amsterdam, Barbie soon filled Montluc prison with Jews. But the Resistance movement led by Jean Moulin proved harder to break. Those involved were fearless and blended into the local population so well that they were able to meet at La Concorde café, a place where Gestapo agents themselves often gathered. The enemies frequently sat just metres apart, drinking espresso.

Little by little, Barbie succeeded in planting around 20 agents in the Resistance movement, and eventually information began to filter back to Gestapo headquarters. A notice board in the basement of Hotel Terminus was filled with pictures and information that revealed the links between the suspects.

Sad fate of Resistance hero

His big breakthrough came in 1943. A well-placed French traitor told Barbie about a secret Resistance meeting that would take place in a villa in Lyon. All the leaders would be there, including the president of the National Council of the Resistance, Jean Moulin. The meeting had barely begun before the door was kicked in and armed German soldiers stormed the room.

Barbie had caught the French off guard. In a matter of minutes, all were handcuffed and removed. When the Gestapo's black cars drove in through the gate at Montluc prison, everyone knew what would happen: the French had heard all about Gestapo torture.

Initially, Barbie attempted to charm his prisoners into talking. He offered Moulin a drink and a cigar in the elegant bar at Hotel Terminus. A pianist played Chopin, and portraits of Hitler, Göring and Goebbels stared down from the walls. But Moulin refused to talk. He stared down at the table and did not say a single word.

Furious at this perceived slight, Barbie marched the Frenchman to suite 68. There, his assistant Dr Bartelmus had prepared the tools for the interrogation: knuckle dusters, whips, handcuffs with pins, needles, a lit candle and Barbie's black baton.

Dr Bartelmus held Moulin's hand between the door and the door frame while Barbie repeatedly slammed the door. The Frenchman's fingers were broken one by one. While the Frenchman screamed, needles were heated until they glowed. Barbie then pushed the red hot steel under Moulin's nails. Knuckle dusters and clubs came next, as he was beaten until blood seeped from countless wounds.

"I want names!" Barbie shouted after each blow, but Moulin remained silent.

When the Frenchman passed out from the pain, Barbie pushed his head into a bath of icy water almost drowning Moulin. Then he was yanked from the water and Barbie repeated his demands. When Moulin refused to speak, he was held under water again.

Later, Moulin was placed in special handcuffs with spikes on the inside. The cuffs could be tightened with a screw, driving the spikes through both flesh and bone. His legs were also crushed.

The torture lasted for several days. Moulin's nails were pulled out, needles were stabbed into his body, he was branded and beaten again and again. Every evening he was driven back to Montluc prison where the prisoners tried to nurse his wounds. One of the them, Christian Pineau, remembers the long night of horror:

"He had lost consciousness, his eyes were hollowed as if they were buried in his head. He had an ugly bluish wound on his temple. A low moan escaped from his swollen lips."

While Moulin's injuries were tended, Barbie enjoyed Lyon's nightlife, where liquor flowed freely and 'loose' women

French Resistance leader never said a word



Jean Moulin

ALBUM/SCANPIX

Four years before he met Klaus Barbie, Jean Moulin wrote that "If the Germans... make me say dishonourable words, you already know, it is not the truth".

The words foreshadowed his refusal to give up secrets to the Germans, even when tortured. De Gaulle described him as "A great man. Great in every way", and Jean Moulin is still revered in France, where more than a thousand streets, squares, bridges and schools are named after him.

crowded around the powerful officers. (Several of them – including Barbie – were treated for sexually transmitted diseases while in the city.) Barbie loved playing the piano and singing traditional German songs for the party-goers. His fingers danced elegantly over the keys, the same fingers that had been smeared in the blood of his audience's countrymen only a few hours earlier.

At the start of July, Moulin was taken to Hotel Terminus for the last time. Barbie repeated his demands for the last time – he wanted the names and addresses of Resistance activists – but Moulin either could not or would not speak.

The interrogator snapped

Finally, Barbie lost his patience. In pure frustration, he beat and kicked the Frenchman with such violence that Moulin was left in a coma. The Frenchman's arms, legs and several ribs were broken. Barbie realised that he had lost the battle of wills against Moulin. He dragged the lifeless body into an adjoining room and showed it to the remaining Resistance members. He was convinced the sight of their president's broken body would make them talk. They saw Moulin lying lifeless on an elegant sofa. His skin was almost yellow, his breathing ragged and his head was swathed in bandages. The men were shocked.

Soon afterwards, Moulin was sent by military train to Frankfurt in Germany, where interrogations would continue when he awoke. But Moulin died before the train left France. He had bravely resisted Barbie for 18 days.

Barbie is promoted and heads to Lyon

In 1942, Klaus Barbie was made Hauptsturmführer (captain) and was ordered to take command of the Gestapo force in Lyon.



ALAMY/IMAGESELECT

From interrogations to torture and mass murder

While Barbie had failed to get a single piece of useful information out of Moulin, Hitler was nevertheless impressed. He awarded Barbie an Iron Cross, First Class. General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces and later France's president, responded from his exile in London by awarding Moulin a posthumous Order of Liberation.

After Moulin's interrogation and torture, Barbie's focus gradually shifted from ordinary interrogations to sadistic torture sessions and the outright mass murder of prisoners.

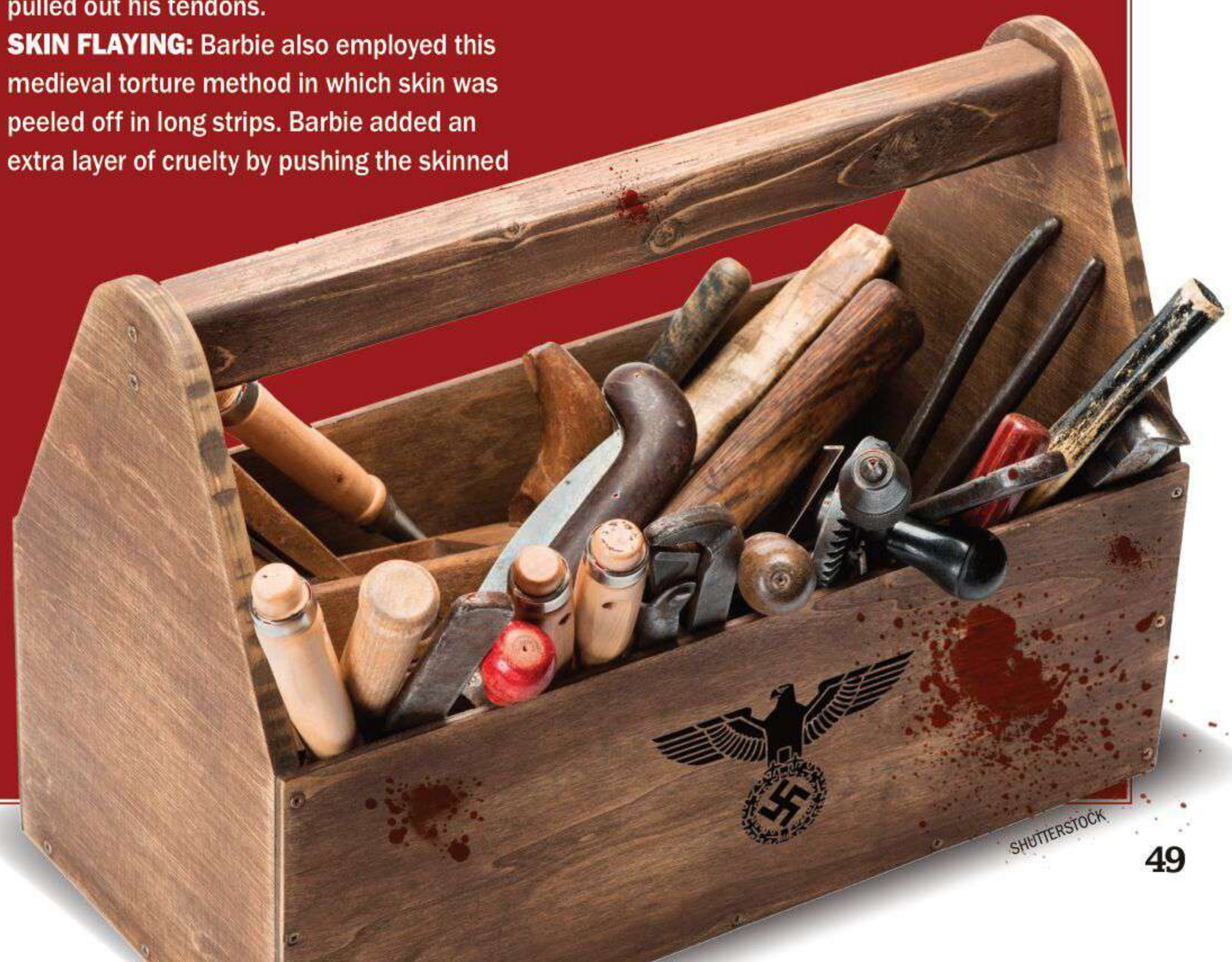
When Adrien Richard, Lyon's deputy chief of police, visited Gestapo headquarters, he could scarcely believe what he saw when he went into the basement.

"When we got to the corridor, we were overwhelmed by the unmistakable odour of warm blood. We went further and came to a puddle of congealed blood in

Torture was used to make prisoners talk

Glowing needles, handcuffs with spikes and acid. Klaus Barbie was willing to use any means at his disposal to squeeze information from his prisoners.

HANDCUFF WITH SPIKES: the prisoner was handcuffed, then hung from the roof by chains. This caused the spikes on the inside to pierce both flesh and bone.
BARE FISTS: Barbie punched prisoners. Witnesses stated that he directed his blows at open wounds and fractured bones.
TRUNCHEON: Barbie always carried a small black cosh with him whenever he interrogated a prisoner.
BOTTLES: beer bottles were pushed deep into the prisoner's mouth until their lips split.
MILITARY FLAIL: prisoners were ordered to lie on their stomachs. Barbie then struck them with a medieval weapon that consisted of a spiked-ball, which was attached to a baton by a chain. One female prisoner lost her ability to walk after Barbie crushed one of her vertebra with the military flail.
CANNULA: at least one prisoner had acid injected into his bladder.
RED-HOT NEEDLES: Jean Moulin, the French Resistance hero, had red-hot needles pushed under his nails.
ELECTRODES: captives were given electric shocks of varying intensity and duration.
DENTAL PLIERS: if a prisoner refused to answer questions, Barbie often responded by pulling out one of the victim's teeth.
TENDON REMOVAL: one prisoner recounted how Barbie drilled a hole in his hand, jabbed a finger into the wound and pulled out his tendons.
SKIN FLAYING: Barbie also employed this medieval torture method in which skin was peeled off in long strips. Barbie added an extra layer of cruelty by pushing the skinned prisoner into a tub of ammonia, which ate the exposed flesh like acid.
BOILING WATER: second-degree burns followed quick dips in boiling water.
ICED WATER: prisoners were revived with freezing water so the torture could continue.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Torturers lived well in Lyon

The Gestapo established its HQ in a hotel. Agents would drink at the bar while the prisoners awaited torture in the basement.



Gestapo prison
Montluc: main prison in Lyon. Thousands of French Resistance fighters and Jews were held here before being sent to concentration camps and killed.

87 km from Lyon

Children's refuge, The Jewish orphanage in Izieu. Barbie found 44 children here and sent them to Auschwitz. All were executed shortly after arriving.

Gestapo headquarters
Hotel Terminus. This upmarket hotel at the railway station became the Gestapo's HQ. Here, officers sipped drinks at the bar, while prisoners screamed in the cellars.



Barbie's last stop
Lyon airport. Barbie ordered his last 109 prisoners executed here before he fled to Germany.

front of a cell door. After the door was opened we witnessed an appalling scene: corpses were piled up in a corner of the cell and literally swimming [sic] in a sea of blood. They were all young men who had been killed by machine guns as they faced the door. Some were bound together... I remember that the postman, still in his uniform, had pulled himself up on a chair before being killed."

Courier never walked again

In March 1944, 43-year-old Lise Lesevre was arrested by the Gestapo. She was an important courier for the Resistance and carried a letter for a key member: 'Didier'.

In Montluc prison she was hung up naked by the screw-tightened handcuffs. Then a cycle of torture began: interrogation, rape, beating, more questions, another rape, more violence, the same questions, over and over again.

"Who is Didier? Where is Didier?" Barbie would ask constantly, staring icily at Lesevre.

"He was terrifying to see, because he had small eyes, like marbles, that moved constantly," she recalled. Many years later she added: "You had a feeling that a ferocious beast was coming into the cell. It was absolute terror."

Even when Barbie wasn't in her cell, he was busy unnerving other prisoners by prowling the basement while constantly slapping a riding crop against his boots.

In one session, Barbie ordered an assistant to beat Lesevre with a medieval military flail (a spiked ball hung by a chain from a stick). The flail broke one of her vertebra and she fainted. Barbie called a doctor to revive her. When she awoke, he was standing over her with piano music playing in the background. Barbie stroked her hands:

"What you've done is magnificent, my dear," he said. "Nobody has held out as long as you. It's nearly over. I'm very upset, but let's finish... Who is 'Didier'?" Silence.

Barbie played his trump card and brought Lesevre's husband and 15-year-old son into the cell. The pair were tortured in front of her, but she still said nothing and they were taken away – she never saw either again. Barbie's sadistic toolbox was empty: once again he had failed. He punched Lesevre in the face and shouted in frustration. "I don't want to see this stupid woman anymore! Get rid of her!"

But Barbie's assistants did not follow his order. Occasionally they took pity on the victims. A German soldier brought coffee to Lesevre that night and talked to her reassuringly. The following day she was sent by train to Ravensbrück concentration camp. After her encounter with Barbie, it was like being released. She survived the war after two years in captivity.

Jewish children sent to Auschwitz

Between the torture sessions with Lesevre and intimidating his other prisoners, Barbie was busy searching for the last Jews hiding in Lyon. On 6th April 1944, he was ready for his most cold-blooded atrocity of the war.

It was a warm morning at the orphanage on the hills outside Izieu. The children had been sent there by their parents so that they would be safe from the Gestapo. Most of the children were Jewish, something that the orphanage had tried to hide from the German-occupying forces. That morning everyone was sitting in the dining

The Americans hire Barbie

The US Army's Couterintelligence Corps hired Barbie after the war to hunt down communist agents in Germany.



U.S. ARMY

Barbie was under 30 when he was sent to command the Gestapo in Lyon.

BUNDESARCHIV, GETTY IMAGES

"I came to kill"

– Klaus Barbie's chilling declaration on arriving in Lyon

Barbie is caught and extradited



In July 1983, Barbie was arrested in Bolivia and extradited to France, where he was convicted of war crimes. He received a life sentence.

BRIDGEMAN

room drinking hot chocolate when two military lorries and a car thundered into the courtyard and came to a stop. Suddenly soldiers were everywhere.

A female employee realised what was going on and screamed for everyone to run. A group of SS soldiers stormed into the house, tore the screaming children from the arms of the staff and threw them into the lorry. The few who managed to get away were quickly brought back crying and carried to the courtyard.

One single employee, 27-year-old Lea Feldblum, managed to flee and hide in the woods. From there she saw everything that happened. In the confusion, a non-Jewish child was also thrown up on the lorry, but he was returned when his identity and heritage were proved using the orphanage's register.

At the same time, Barbie and his assistant Dr Bartelmus stood nearby, watching. When the lorries arrived in Lyon, Barbie wrote a short report to the German High Command:

"This morning an end was brought to the activities of the Jewish children's home at Izieu. A total of 41 children aged 3 to 13 were arrested. In addition, the whole of the Jewish population, ten persons including five women, were arrested. No money or other values were found. Transport to Drancy will take place on 7th April 1944." The short note was signed "Barbie".

Drancy was a collection point for captured French Jews. Once there, the children and orphanage staff were forced into dirty boxcars at the train station before being transported to Auschwitz. Shortly after their arrival, all the children and staff were killed in the gas chambers.

The death of innocence

On 6th June 1944, the Allies initiated the D-Day landings signalling the start of the liberation of France. While the blood flowed on Normandy's beaches, Barbie hurried to capture the few remaining Jewish families in Lyon. Mr and Mrs Lagrange and their 13-year-old daughter, Simone, thought that the liberation of Jews like themselves was close at hand when they heard the news of the landings that morning, but the SS soldiers got there first.

As the small family was taken away, neighbours closed their windows and ignored their cries for help. It became



1.5 million children killed

Klaus Barbie was not alone in killing children during World War II.

Barbie wasn't the only Nazi who targeted children in WWII, nor was his deportation of the Jewish children at the Izieu orphanage an isolated incident in the occupied territories.

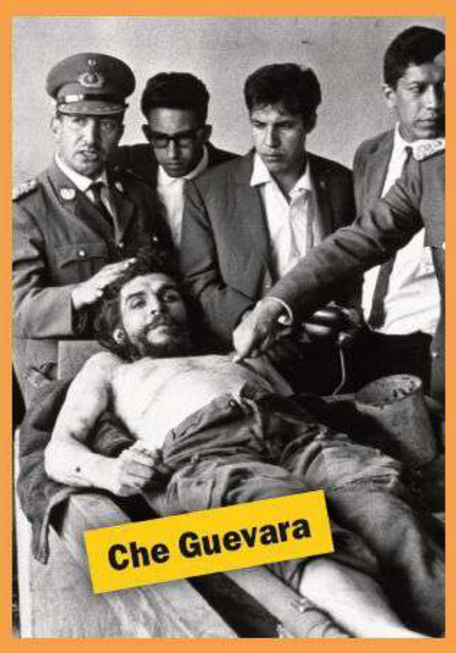
The Nazis considered Jewish children 'unproductive'. At the same time, they represented the future of Judaism – a new generation that could return and avenge those killed. Therefore, thousands of Jewish children of all ages were sent to concentration camps, where most were gassed shortly after arrival.

In many cases, newborns were thrown directly into the crematorium furnaces, while several thousand children died after being subjected to cruel and monstrous medical experiments by the ruthless concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele. The doctor fled to South America after the war and never answered for his crimes.

The youngest of the 44 children captured by Barbie at the Izieu orphanage was just four years old; the oldest was 17. All died.

GETTY IMAGES

Gestapo commander was given a top job by the Americans



BRIDGEMAN

After the war, the US Army's Couterintelligence Corps (CIC) hired Barbie to hunt communists in Germany. Despite French pressure to have him extradited, the US denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. They later smuggled the ex-Gestapo agent to Bolivia, where he helped the CIC and Bolivian army kill the revolutionary Che Guevara in 1965.

"a day that started with joy and ended in sadness for us", Simone Lagrange later lamented. The family was housed in one of Hotel Terminus' suites. Suddenly, Barbie came in, dressed in a stylish grey suit and with a cat in his arms. He smiled at Simone, stroked her cheek and said she was pretty. "He cannot be evil since he loves animals", she thought.

Barbie wanted to know where the family's other two children were. When charm failed to produce an answer, he dropped his act and grabbed 13-year-old Simone by her hair and began beating her around the head. Her parents cried and asked for mercy, but Barbie was ice cold. He placed Simone in isolation at Montluc prison, and during the week that followed, tortured the girl as though she were a hardened resistance fighter.

Every day he entered her cell with a smile before kicking her open wounds. A week later, Barbie took Simone to her parents' cell and held her swollen, bloody face up to her mother.

"See, now, what you've done to your daughter," hissed the Gestapo boss.

But once again Barbie proved to be an ineffective interrogator: the Lagrange family refused to give him the whereabouts of their sons. Soon the three Lagranges he had captured were sent to Auschwitz. Simone's mother was gassed immediately; her daughter and husband were put to work.

A year later, when the camp was evacuated during the last chaotic days of the war, father and daughter caught a glimpse of each other. They almost managed to embrace, but then the father was suddenly ordered to his knees and killed with a single shot. Against all the odds, Simone Lagrange survived to tell her story.

Human shields

In mid-August, as Allied forces approached Lyon, Barbie sent as many prisoners as he could by train eastwards. But he retained 109 Jews and Resistance members to use as human shields while he made his escape to the airport in Bron on 23rd August.

Once the German party had arrived safely at the plane, Barbie ordered that all the hostages be shot and dumped in a mass grave. Then he boarded a Luftwaffe aircraft and left France. The following day, the Allies rolled into Lyon and freed 950 prisoners from Montluc prison. The Gestapo's reign of terror was finally over.

After a few months on the Western Front, Barbie deserted. His location – first in Germany and later in South America – remained hidden for 38 years thanks to the US Army's Couterintelligence Corps (CIC), who hired him after the war.

It was not until 1983 that his bloody past finally caught up with him. The former Gestapo executioner was traced to Bolivia by Nazi hunters Serge and Beate Klarsfeld. From there, he was extradited to France, where he was convicted of crimes against humanity following a lengthy trial.

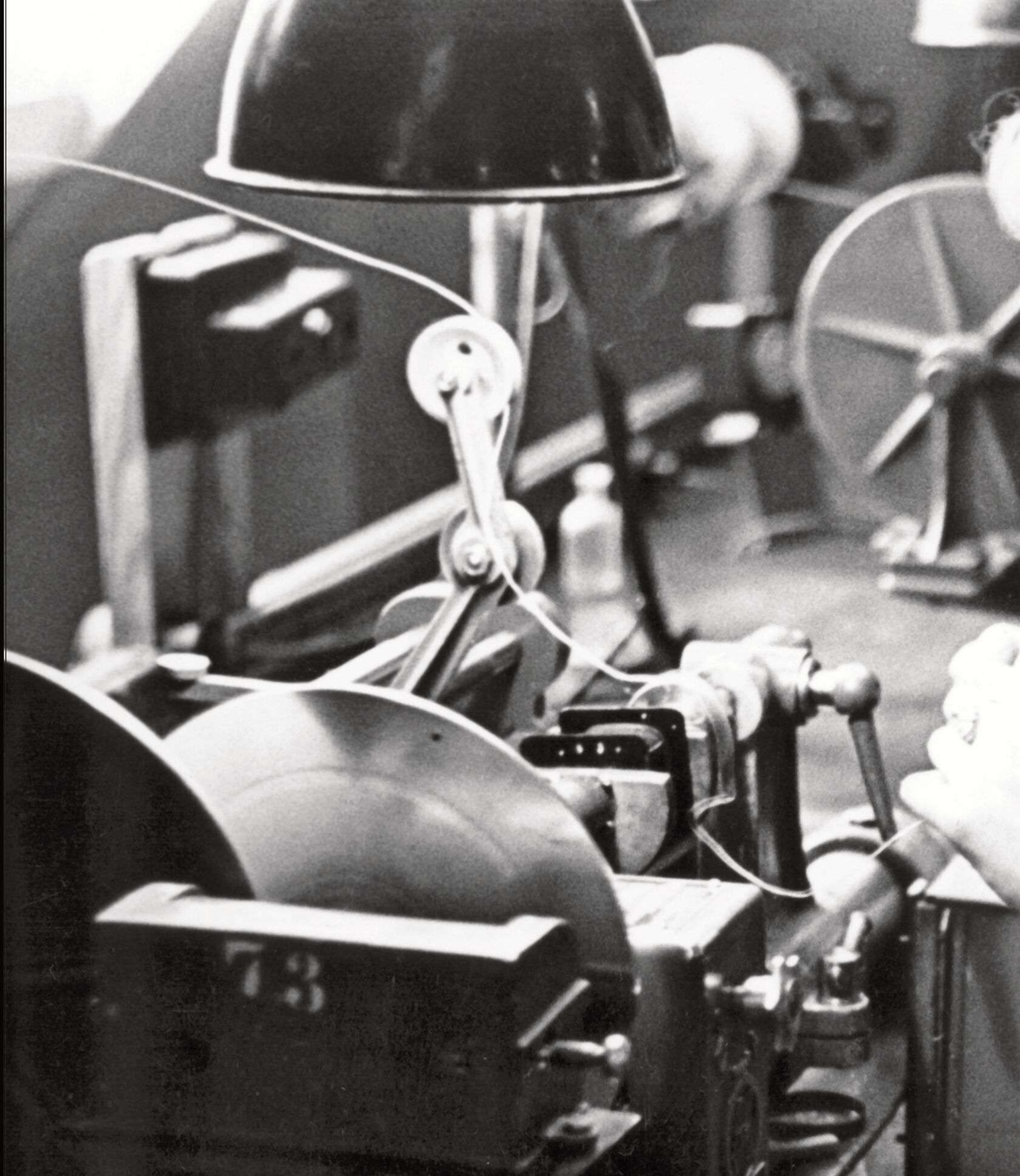
It was only during the trial, that the full extent of Klaus Barbie's heinous crimes came to light. The German Gestapo agent had murdered, or ordered the killings of, 4,342 people in the French Resistance movement, and had deported 7,591 Jews – men, women and children – to German concentration camps, where most of them died.



AFP/SCANPIX

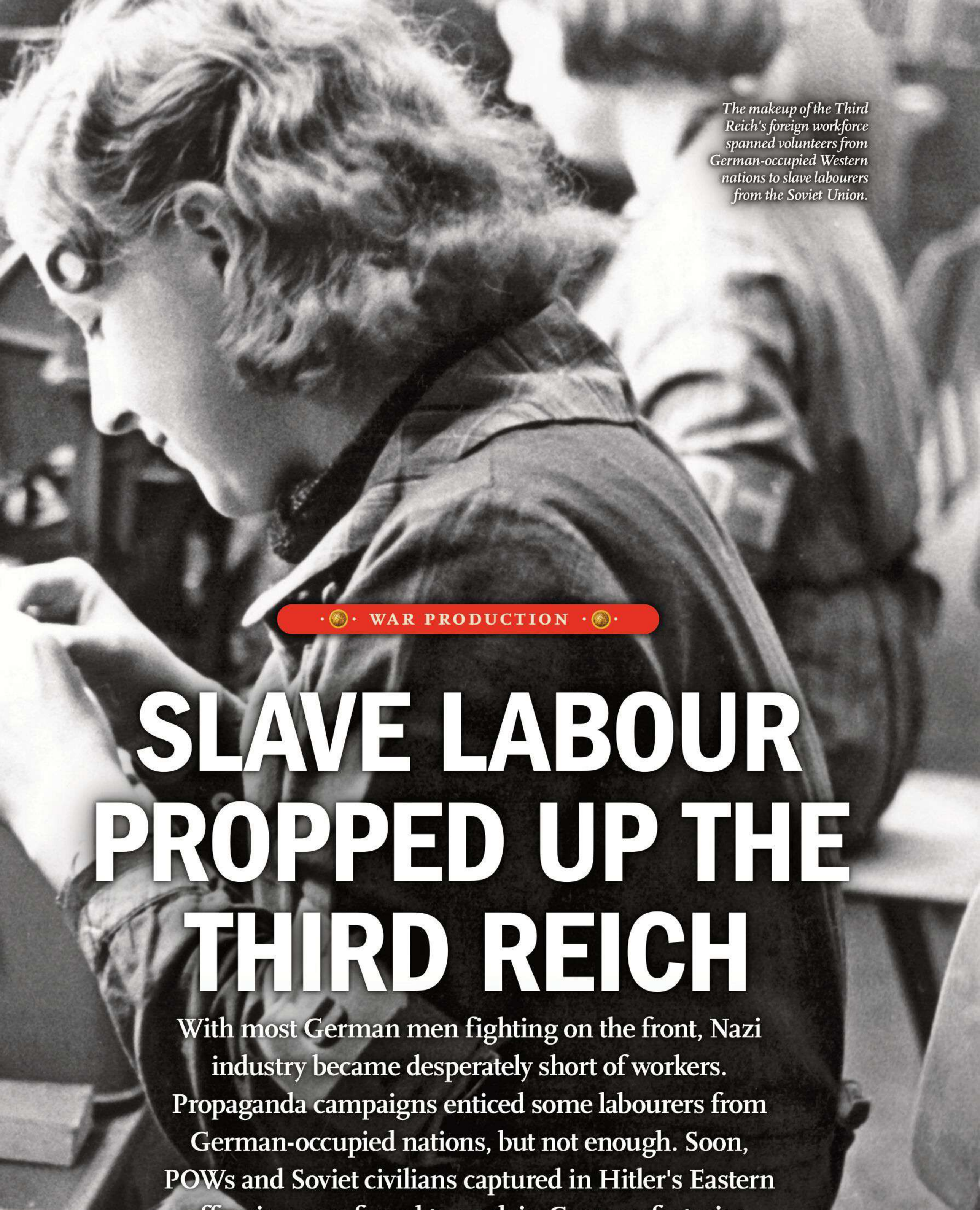
Klaus Barbie got life

In 1987, Barbie was finally caught and tried on 41 counts of crimes against humanity. The court in Lyon found him guilty and gave him a life sentence. He died in prison four years later.



1942

3RD JUNE



The makeup of the Third Reich's foreign workforce spanned volunteers from German-occupied Western nations to slave labourers from the Soviet Union.

WAR PRODUCTION

SLAVE LABOUR PROPPED UP THE THIRD REICH

With most German men fighting on the front, Nazi industry became desperately short of workers. Propaganda campaigns enticed some labourers from German-occupied nations, but not enough. Soon, POWs and Soviet civilians captured in Hitler's Eastern offensive were forced to work in German factories.

The Third Reich, 1942

THE STAGE IS SET



By the spring of 1942, 20 percent of Nazi workers are POWs, concentration camp detainees or forced labourers from other countries. The majority are from the Soviet Union and Poland, but French, Italians, Scandinavians and Belgians also toil for the Germans. Eastern workers are labelled as 'subhuman' and treated as slaves.

Anna Nesteruk would never forget 3rd June 1942. German soldiers went from house to house in her village in western Ukraine, pushing selected residents from their homes. The soldiers mostly chose young women, aged 16-17. Screaming obscenities and shoving the women with their rifle butts, the soldiers drove their captives to the nearby town of Starokostyantyniv. Terrified, Anna was forced along with them. She knew those who disobeyed would be shot. In town, the women were bundled onto a train in a livestock wagon; there were no seats or bunks, just bars on the windows. It was freezing cold. The doors were bolted and soon, the train rattled off.

Although Anna didn't know it then, she was on her way to Ford-Werke, the German Ford factory situated just outside Cologne. Like millions of others from the Soviet Union, Poland, Belgium, France and the Netherlands, Anna had been brought to Germany to help fill the vacancies left in the labour market when large numbers of German men were sent to the front. Working in miserable conditions, forced labourers helped to maintain Germany's agriculture and industry, and most especially its war production. Wages were pitiful at best and slave labourers from the East received no payment at all.

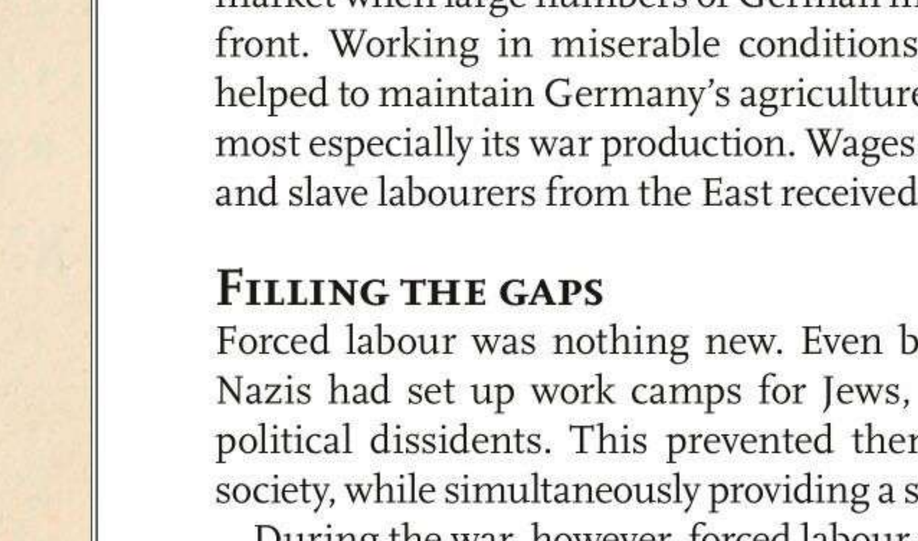
Filling the gaps

Forced labour was nothing new. Even before the war, the Nazis had set up work camps for Jews, homosexuals and political dissidents. This prevented them 'contaminating' society, while simultaneously providing a service to the Reich.

During the war, however, forced labour was employed on a far grander scale. Around 18 million Germans entered the *Wehrmacht* (German armed forces) during the war and the Nazis needed to replace them if they were going to build enough fighter planes, tanks and lorries to win the war.

As soon as German troops crossed the border into Poland on 1st September 1939, the Nazis began rounding up people and sending them to work in Germany. The idea of forcing Poles to work as slaves fitted perfectly with Hitler's plan to provide 'Lebensraum', a new 'living space' in the East that could accommodate the rapidly growing German population. The native inhabitants of the territories that Hitler had earmarked for the Third Reich's *Ostmark* – its new Eastern provinces – were considered to be subhuman by the Nazis, meaning that they needed to be either eradicated or used for slave labour.

Within weeks of the invasion, more than 300,000 prisoners



Homemade clogs were the only footwear forced labourers possessed.

of war were sent to Germany to work, mainly in agriculture. Later, other Poles were summoned to work in Germany, either through public notices or local, Nazi-controlled labour offices. However, the majority were simply abducted on the street or from their homes – a practice that the Germans continued during their invasion of the Soviet Union in 1942. One of the people they kidnapped was Anna Nesteruk, who after travelling for days, found herself climbing out of the livestock wagon at a station near Cologne in western Germany.



Workers' barracks in front of Ford-Werke were bombed by Allied aircraft.



Lorries and other military vehicles were produced by Ford in Cologne.

German war plans gave Ford a boost

Nesteruk and her fellow passengers were placed aboard a lorry and driven to a fenced compound just outside Cologne. This was Ford-Werke, the German Ford factory. Like Opel, Ford was US-owned, but it had established a factory in Germany in 1925 and was keen to see it prosper.

With Hitler in the Reich Chancellery, both Ford and Opel hoped to benefit from the Nazi military build-up by securing lucrative contracts to build support vehicles. They increased their investment in new plant facilities and intensified their lobbying of defence contract handlers. It paid off: both Ford and Opel received contracts and ramped up production. As a result, when the Nazis blasted through Europe in the spring of 1940, the lorries that supported their advance were supplied by Ford and Opel, who, together with Daimler-Benz, were the major suppliers of trucks for Hitler's blitzkrieg.

Ford-Werke's director, Robert Schmidt, worked closely with senior Wehrmacht personnel to ensure that Ford was delivering as required. At the same time, Reich officials did everything they could to ensure that the



Soviet women were repatriated using the same trains that had taken them to work in western Germany.



OST (meaning east) was emblazoned on the clothing of all Eastern workers.

Children born to Eastern women working in the camp factories were considered undesirable in the Third Reich and were sent to live in poorly run orphanages with high mortality rates.

FACT

EASTERNERS WERE SLAVES

■ *Ostarbeiter* (Eastern workers) were considered to be subhuman. Forced from their homes in Poland or the Soviet Union, they were made to wear the letters OST. Eastern workers were treated as slaves, lived in primitive barracks and received the poorest food and no pay.

■ *Westarbeiter* (Western workers) were usually POWs and forced labourers with a small number of volunteers from France, Belgium and the Nordic countries. Western workers could leave the camp during their free time, received wages and were entitled to time off.

factories had everything that they needed to guarantee continuous production – including an adequate supply of labour.



Slave labourers were identified by number; their names weren't recorded.

Workers starved and froze

When the companies' labour force left for the front in the summer of 1940, the German authorities immediately transferred forced labourers to the factories. The first to arrive were French POWs in 1940. Then, in April 1942, slave labour appeared from the Soviet Union. By the summer of 1943, a total of 1,200 Soviets were working as slave labourers at the factory. Among them was Anna Nesteruk and her colleague, Inna Kulagina, a young girl from Rostov in Russia who, like Anna, had been abducted by the Germans and taken to Cologne. Inna described the Ford camp:

"The barracks was built like this: doors – beds, doors – beds. In the middle of the barracks was an iron oven. At night [the barracks] was locked up and some iron bucket was set up. That was our toilet... Around the camp there was a barbed wire fence, and guard posts everywhere, so that we wouldn't run away."

The barracks, which was one of many on the site, housed 250-300 people, and apart from a few small stoves – which were insufficient to heat the building during the harsh continental winters – the only furniture were bunk beds.

The food was terrible, too. Usually, it consisted of a thin broth – the *balanda* (water soup) as the workers called it – which consisted of water and cabbage. At times, they also got a morsel of dry bread, but hunger constantly nagged. Slave labourers couldn't leave the camp without special permission. All forced-labour factories committed to enclosing the camps and hiring private guards to keep the workers in check.

The police in Cologne were also ordered to arrest any slave labourers found on the streets. Despite these edicts, however, the workers regularly scraped the sandy soil from beneath the barbed wire fence and snuck out for a few hours to beg for food. The workers asked passersby for help or stood silently outside the bakery, with their hands outstretched to customers leaving the store.

"We went to the village and begged from the Germans who lived there. Some gave us potatoes; some gave us a piece of bread. But sometimes you would go and no one gave you anything. So it was", Anna recalled.

Everyday violence

Worse than the hunger, sickness and lack of privacy was the fatigue. Work took place in 12-hour shifts, day and night. The exhausted workers were forced to operate large industrial machines; accidents were inevitable. Inna lost her finger to exhaustion when her eyes closed one night while she was operating a machine at the plant.

When the tiredness became too much, the workers would visit the bathroom above the machine room. As well as toilets and a shower, the room had an oven. The heat and the tranquillity made the room a treasured haven for Inna and her co-workers, who often pretended to be using the facilities, but were really sleeping in the toilet stalls. Unfortunately, Inna was caught one day by the foreman who hit her violently in the stomach and dragged her down the stairs, causing her to lose consciousness. Violence was a part of everyday life. The guards used rubber truncheons on the workforce, especially on Russian or Polish workers who were deemed to be the lowest of the low.

Bombs hit the barracks

The strict regime paid off for the companies and the German government. Production increased. Reich commissioner Johannes Krohn informed Director Schmidt "that the enterprises you administer contributed even more towards raising our arms potential in... 1943 than in 1942".

Ford's earnings rose, too, from $128 million in 1941 to $132 million in 1942, with revenues peaking at $137

Shamed sex slave workers hid their story for decades

Some women were forced to provide sexual services to male camp prisoners. Their treatment was concealed for almost 50 years.

Around 200 women were forced to become prostitutes in Buchenwald, Dachau, Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. Here, the camp commanders established so-called *sonderbauten* (special buildings) that served as brothels. Access to these buildings was part of a prize system devised by SS boss Heinrich Himmler and was offered as a reward for good behaviour. Entry was controlled by SS soldiers, who were not permitted to visit prostitutes themselves. After the war, the surviving women were too ashamed to reveal what had happened to them, and the brothels' existence only came to light in the 1990s.


Heinrich Himmler

Himmler devised the brothel system as a reward for male camp prisoners.



Female Eastern workers were rescued minutes before being executed when British regiments liberated Osnabrück in April 1945. In the final weeks of the war, the Germans murdered thousands of slave labourers, POWs and camp prisoners to erase evidence of war crimes.

million in 1943. The number of forced labourers was at its height in the summer of 1944. By then, the Reich Labour Service, which oversaw the administration and allocation of the nation's forced labour resources, had acquired a few hundred thousand Italian soldiers. These had been captured when the new Italian government surrendered to the Allies in September 1943. Ford-Werke received 500 of the new workers.

From August 1944, concentration camp prisoners were also put on the Ford production line. However, with the Allied D-Day invasion and the successful Soviet offensive in the East, that summer was the beginning of the end for the Nazis.

At Ford-Werke, production began to decline after the Allies bombed Cologne in autumn 1944. Routes in and out of the city were damaged in the raids and Ford had difficulty getting goods to and from the factory. The plant itself wasn't hit until October 1944 when Allied aircraft bombed the facility in two rounds. Unfortunately, the bombs hit a barracks that housed the Soviet workers instead of the factory. The building caught fire and hundreds of people were killed in the blaze.

"There was such a screaming! A terrible screaming", recalled Franciszek Wójcikowski, a concentration camp prisoner at Ford-Werke.

Workers were labelled as traitors

Factories began to evacuate machines and workers to the area west of the Rhine. But production never restarted. Soon, the explosion of bombs and shells sounded dangerously close to Oberhausen, where Anna was now located. In mid-April 1945, workers hid in a bunker until a US soldier knocked on the door. The workers tied a bedsheet to a stick and surrendered.

At the time of the liberation, around 11 million forced labourers were in Germany. For many, returning home was a mixed blessing. Anna Nesteruk came home to a ruin:

"I got back to my house on 30th October. When the Germans retreated, they had burned the house down. The whole village was evacuated. Mother was alive, she did not die. But the house was gone."

The worst part, however, was the contempt of Soviet officials and their new neighbours. Anna recalled the accusations: "They called us traitors. 'You sold yourselves to the Germans, you worked for them' [they said]". Like the majority of forced labourers, she returned to a life of poverty.

Ford-Werke's success continued after the war. Production soon resumed – the plant was now making Allied lorries. A few years later, senior managers who'd worked with the Nazis were back in their former roles. Among them was Robert Schmidt, who remained at the plant until his death in 1962.

NAME **FRITZ SAUCKEL**

1894-1946

TITLE GAULEITER AND REICHSTAG MEMBER

Seaman organised forced labour

Sauckel's career was modest. He had trained as a seaman and factory worker before joining the Nazi Party in 1923. Soon afterwards, he was appointed as the party's gauleiter in Thuringia. In 1942, Hitler appointed Sauckel as the general agent for the Labour Service, essentially establishing him as the head of the organisation responsible for forced labour in the Third Reich.



- **Raised in poverty.**
- **Sentenced to death.**

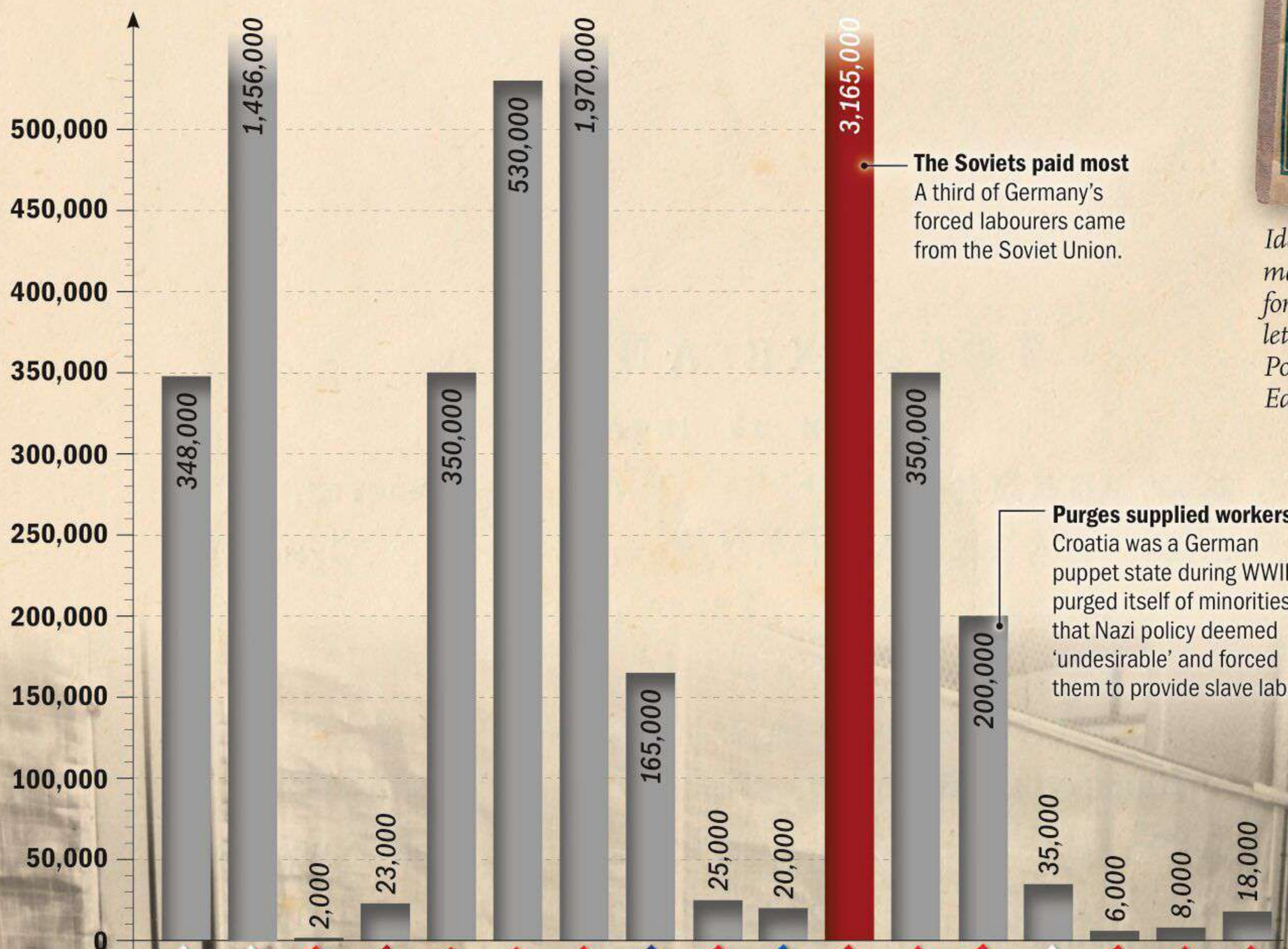
Half the workforce came from Eastern Europe

In 1945, it is estimated that over 11 million forced labourers returned home, with more than half of them heading East. The last official tally, in January 1944, was a few million lower but the number of workers increased dramatically during the year.



Identity papers were mandatory for foreign workers. The letter P was worn by Poles, who were seen as Eastern workers.

Foreign workers in the Third Reich in 1944:



The Soviets paid most
A third of Germany's forced labourers came from the Soviet Union.

Purges supplied workers
Croatia was a German puppet state during WWII. It purged itself of minorities that Nazi policy deemed 'undesirable' and forced them to provide slave labour.

At the experimental facility in Peenemünde, Soviet workers manufactured German V-1 and V-2 rockets.

REINHARD HEYDRICH

HITLER'S ARYAN EXECUTIONER

He was the grandson of an opera composer and rose to become Hitler's favourite. The Aryan fencing virtuoso Reinhard Heydrich coldly crushed his rivals and eradicated any resistance to Nazism. At the peak of his career, he masterminded the extermination of Europe's Jews. It was to become his shameful legacy.

For 11 years, Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich exterminated Jews and political opponents alike with unsettling efficiency.

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD & BPK

CZECHOSLOVAKIA/1941

WWII rages into its third year. Hitler's troops are on the offensive on all fronts, and victory seems close. In occupied areas, the German Gestapo secret police suppresses all resistance with an iron fist.



AF THOMAS HEBSGAARD

The baking May sun shone down on Jozef Gabcík. For more than an hour, the 30-year-old Czechoslovakian had waited impatiently at a tram stop in the Prague district of Liben. Sweat glistened on his forehead, evidence of the morning's searing heat. Despite this, he stood with a raincoat draped over his arm. Under it, Gabcík had hidden a submachine gun.

The British Sten Mk II FF 209 would be used to kill the head of the Reich Main Security Office, Reinhard Heydrich. For the past year, the hated Nazi had ruled Bohemia and Moravia – today's Czech Republic – with cynical brutality. Now, he was going to die.

On the opposite pavement, 28-year-old Jan Kubiš leaned against a lamppost. In his hand, he carried a suitcase containing two bombs. For the two men, there was nothing else to do but wait. Sooner or later, Heydrich's black Mercedes 320 Convertible B had to show up; according to reliable intelligence, Hitler's henchman would drive past the two men at some point that morning.

Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich was at the peak of his Nazi career. As deputy commander of the SS and chief of the SD intelligence services and Gestapo secret police, the 38-year-old Heydrich had played a key role in the upper echelons of the Third Reich for ten years. At the same time, he was the de facto sole ruler in Bohemia and Moravia, where he installed himself in the old royal castle overlooking Prague.

At 10.30 on 27th May 1942, Gabcík and Kubiš' plan suddenly kicked into action. A flicker of light flashed in the eyes of the two partisans. It was the long-awaited signal, passed on from lookout Josef Valcík who'd been keeping watch for Heydrich for the past hour.

Gabcík sprinted across the street to Kubiš, just as a tram stopped to unload passengers. At that moment, a black Mercedes convertible with the registration plate SS-3 came into view. To the relief of the conspirators, only the driver and the tall, blond Heydrich were in the car. Heydrich sat quietly in the back, completely oblivious to his fate.

The sharp bend on which the partisans had positioned themselves forced Heydrich's driver to slow down. As the car came within three metres of Gabcík, the Czech dropped his raincoat, exposing his Sten gun, and squeezed the trigger. But to his dismay, nothing happened. The weapon was jammed with grass Gabcík that had been keeping in the coat's pocket to feed his rabbits.

While the Czech fumbled anxiously with his weapon, Reinhard Heydrich ordered his driver to stop. Without fear or hesitation, he rose from the back seat of the open car, pulled out his gun and aimed directly at the would-be assassin. The Gestapo boss pressed the trigger, but, as with Gabcík's attempt, nothing happened. A hollow click rang out – the gun was empty.

BPK



SS chief Heinrich Himmler was wary of his blazingly intelligent second in command, but Heydrich's achievements and ideas proved indispensable to the Nazis.

Heydrich's naval expulsion

The story of the 'Blonde Beast's' path to the top of the Nazi hierarchy, however, started far from the Czech capital, and with a significantly less assured Reinhard Heydrich.

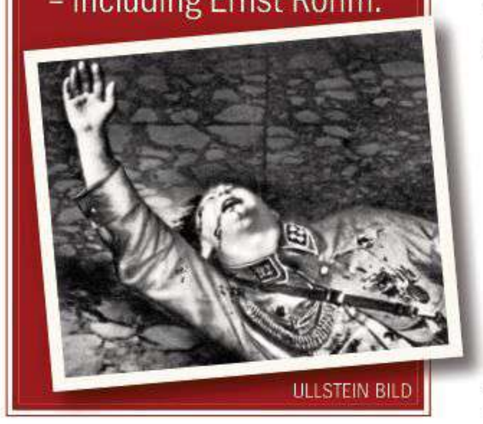
In the spring of 1931, the then 27-year-old German's life had just fallen apart. For several days, he had locked himself in his parents' home in the south-eastern German city of Halle, crying with anger and self-pity for the injustice he'd just experienced. A woman had claimed that Heydrich had promised her marriage. Heydrich himself believed he was perfectly within his rights to have left the woman in favour of vehement Nazi party member Lina von Osten.

In front of a military court of honour, Heydrich denied having promised the abandoned woman anything, and defiantly declared that he saw no reason for the court's interference with what he, as a naval officer, should and should not do. This high-handed attitude did not win over the naval chiefs, and the young lieutenant's dreams of a career at sea were shattered as he found himself thrown out of the navy.

The atmosphere in his parents' home only served to make the young Heydrich even more depressed. The respectable bourgeois family was hit hard by the economic crisis enveloping the country. His father was too ill to work, and his once-renowned music conservatory in Halle was on the verge of losing state recognition. And, with no funds for a maid, his mother had to do the housework

HEYDRICH
THE BRAIN BEHIND THE SA'S ANNIHILATION

As Gestapo chief, Heydrich personally selected the SA leaders killed during the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934 – including Ernst Röhm.



ULLSTEIN BILD

herself at the same time as supporting the family's three adult children by giving piano lessons.

Heydrich lands a job with the SS

For months, Heydrich and Lina von Osten pondered their fate. The solution came via Heydrich's mother, who was deeply concerned by seeing her son so depressed.

Through a friend, she learned that the National Socialist German Workers' Party was looking for someone for its leader's newly created bodyguard, the SS. It was a position that, not insignificantly, would allow little 'Reini' to wear a smart black SS uniform to replace his lost navy attire.

Heydrich immediately joined this Nazi party, a prerequisite for the job, and on Lina's 20th birthday on 14th June, he travelled to Munich to meet the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. According to Lina, it was "the starriest hour of my life, of our life".

Himmler received Heydrich at his small poultry farm on the outskirts of Munich, and was immediately impressed by the tall, blond Heydrich's 'Aryan' appearance. He set a test for his visitor: the Nazi party wanted to create an intelligence apparatus, and Himmler asked Heydrich how it should be organised.

It was only then that it dawned on Heydrich what the position entailed, but he immediately threw himself into the assignment. To arrive at a solution, he combined his naval experience with the intelligence methods he had read about in his beloved British spy novels.

The result impressed Himmler. The 30-year-old SS chief's brief acknowledgment of Heydrich's suggestion read: "Good, I'll take you on". The pair agreed a modest starting salary of 120 Reichsmarks a month.

In the early 1930s, Hitler's party was plagued by internal power struggles, which Heydrich quickly realised could be exploited to his advantage. From his modest office in Munich's party headquarters, where for the first months he was required to share a typewriter with another party official, he tirelessly gathered useful information on the Nazi party's friends and enemies. At first, Heydrich's limited his intelligence gathering to specific people, and his files comprised just a few paper cards in a cigar box, but over the following three years it grew into a huge, well-organised directory. By 1934, Heydrich was the most well-informed man in the Nazi system.

He knew the most unpleasant, personal episodes from Hitler's youth. He knew of Goebbels' many affairs, of Göring's morphine abuse, and of the abdominal cramps that Himmler worked so hard to conceal.

Heydrich had compromising information on almost everyone, which he could use at a later date if necessary. Heydrich's directory was put to use for the first time shortly after Hitler's takeover in 1933. Heydrich's security service (the SD, or Sicherheitsdienst) set up the Nazis' first concentration camp in Dachau, and the communists, socialists, intellectuals and anti-Nazi artists catalogued in Heydrich's files were among the first inmates.

The Nazi apprentice

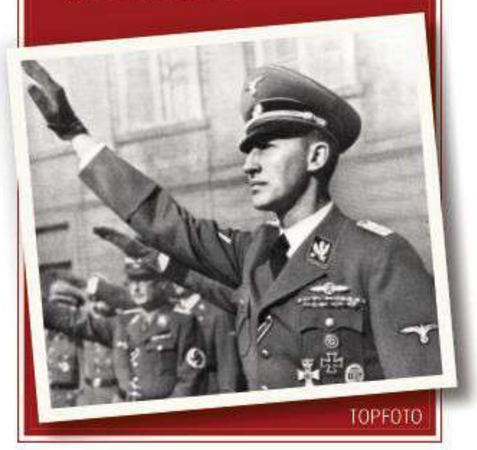
In recognition of his good work, Heydrich was promoted in April 1934 to head up the secret police, the Gestapo, in addition to his existing role. Later that year, he organised the Night of the Long Knives, helping to purge the paramilitary SA and remove a potential threat to Hitler's leadership in the form of SA leader Ernst Röhm.

The Führer had begun to perceive the brown-clad SA army of street-fighting thugs as a problem that

HEYDRICH

POSTER BOY FOR THE THIRD REICH

Heydrich's Aryan appearance secured him hero status in the Third Reich. Among other things, he was a model in books showing the correct Nazi salute and uniform.



TOPFOTO

SS ENFORCER RELAXED BY FENCING AND PLAYING THE VIOLIN

The fiery workaholic Heydrich found peace in two passions: fencing and solitary moments with his beloved violin.

Although Reinhard Heydrich often worked 16 hours a day, he still found time to cultivate his two passions: fencing and music.

Heydrich was the star of the German fencing team in 1941. He loved the sport so much that it was the motivation for a handful of extremely rare glimpses of mercy. He helped former German fencing champion Paul Sommer, a Jew, escape to the United States. And when Germany invaded Poland, he immediately sent express instructions that no members of Poland's Olympic fencing team should be harmed.

While his fencing skills were taught, Heydrich's other great interest, music, was effectively printed on his baptismal certificate. He received his middle name Tristan after Wagner's opera 'Tristan and Isolde', and his second middle name, Eugen, came from his grandfather, who founded the world-famous Dresden Royal Conservatory. Despite his musical origins and unmistakable ability as a violinist, Heydrich never chose to focus on music as a career path. Rather, it acted as a retreat from his work: often, colleagues found Heydrich in his back yard, wearing his black SS uniform, completely lost to the outside world while he played his violin with expert skill.



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Heydrich was one of the stars of the German fencing team in 1941.





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The Nazi model family, with Heydrich's wife Lina and children Silke, Heider and Klaus.

needed addressing. Heydrich immediately offered a solution: from his thousands of index cards, he quickly compiled a list of SA leaders that had to be killed.

While Hitler and Himmler arrested the primary targets, Heydrich himself did not refrain from signing execution orders. A total of 89 people were killed between 30th June and 2nd July, all without trial. Among those executed were former party organiser Gregor Strasser, who was held at the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin and shot from behind on Heydrich's orders. The other prisoners heard the Gestapo boss exclaim: "Isn't he dead yet? Let the swine bleed." With those words, Heydrich left his former party comrade to die on the floor of his cell.

HEYDRICH
LEADER OF THE DEATH SQUADS

Heydrich headed the Einsatzgruppen, the dreaded death squads that executed more than two million Jews, Romanies and Soviet partisans on the Eastern Front.

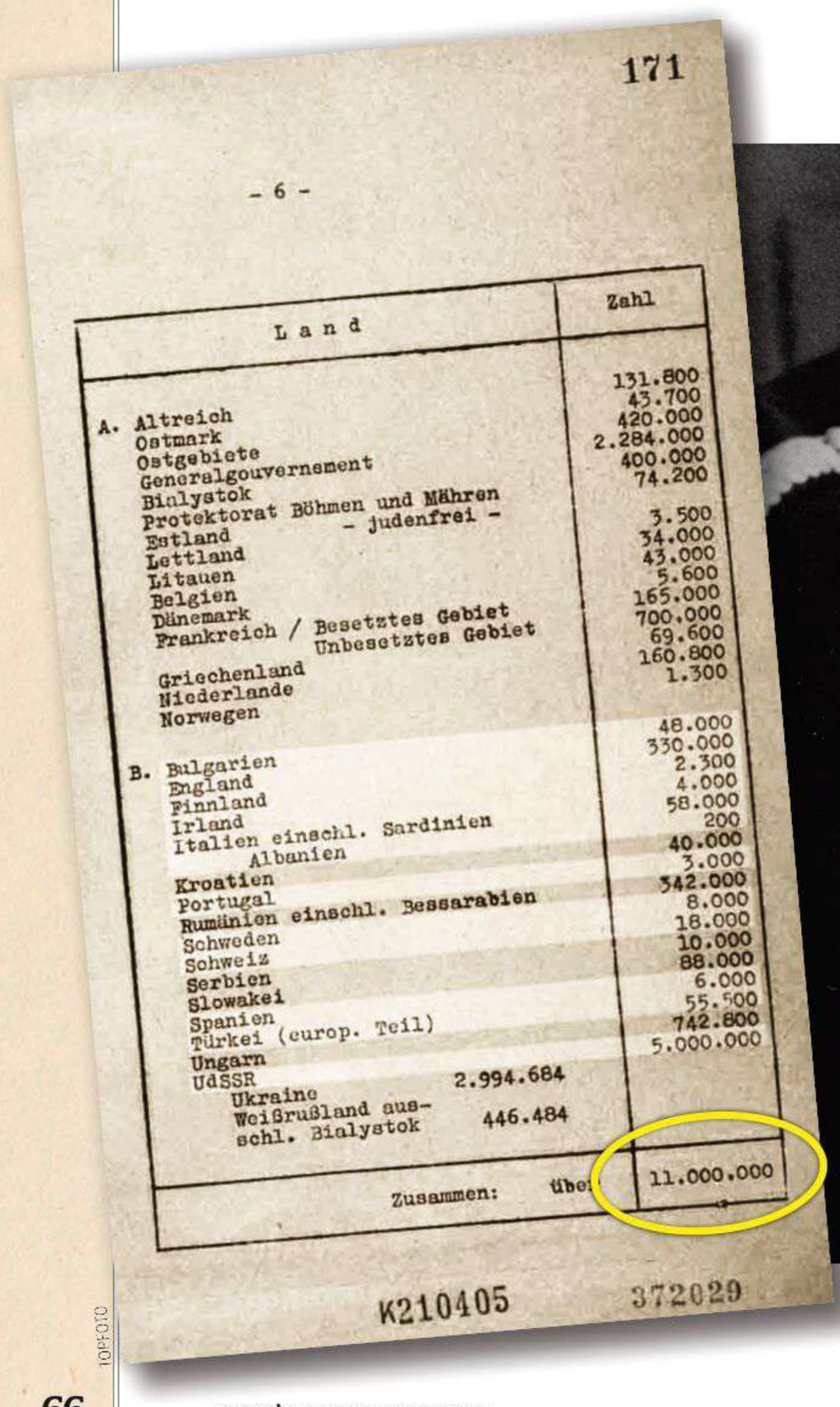


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Fearless and friendless

This was typical of Heydrich, who never let friendships get in the way of his career. Instead, he made it to the top via his immense work ethic. He always made sure to stay one step ahead, especially in relation to Himmler, whom he was able to frequently win over with his well-prepared and razor-sharp arguments. Often, Heydrich would manoeuvre his SS commander so well he could hardly agree to do otherwise than agree with his deputy.

"As a political personality, Heydrich is undoubtedly more dynamic and far superior. He knows this and expresses his superiority in the elegance of his reports, and Himmler is simply unable to match him," noted Himmler's masseur Dr Felix Kersten, who often had the opportunity to observe the



171

- 6 -

Land	Zahl
A. Altreich	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland - judenfrei -	
Lettland	3.500
Litauen	34.000
Belgien	43.000
Dänemark	5.600
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	165.000
Unbesetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.500
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine 2.994.684	
Weißrußland aus- 446.484	
schl. Bialystok	
Zusammen: über	11.000.000

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In 1941, when the Nazi leadership planned the extermination of the Jews, Heydrich laid the foundations. He estimated the number of Jews in Europe to be 11 million.

SUSPICIONS OF 'IMPURE' BLOOD DOGGED HEYDRICH

Rumours of Jewish blood in his family history threatened Heydrich's career and were a perpetual concern for the otherwise confident man.

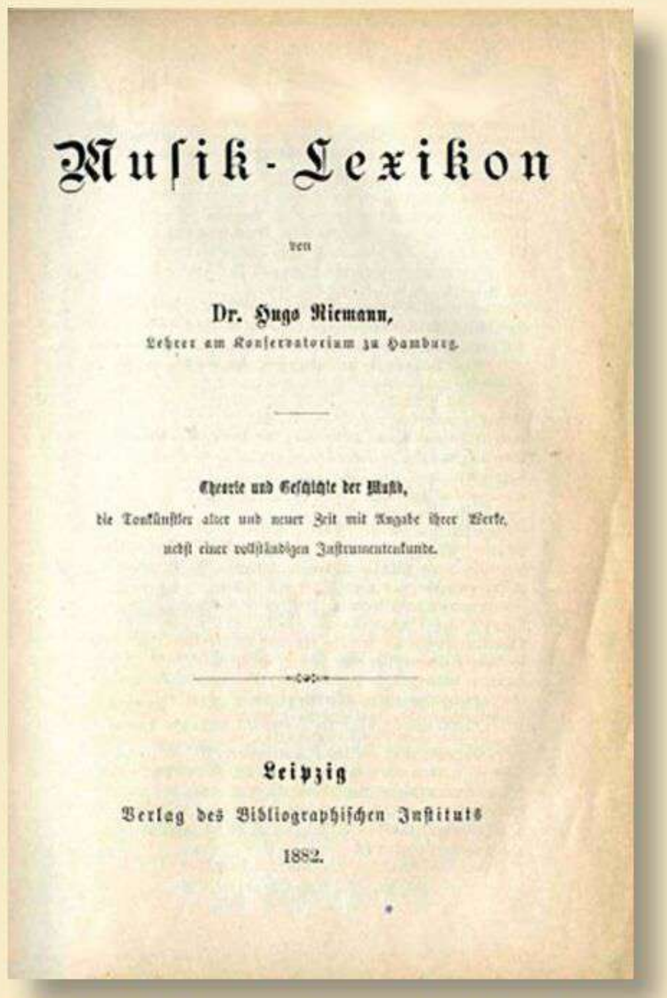
Throughout his time in the Nazi party, Reinhard Heydrich had to fight rumours that Jewish blood was concealed in his ancestry – and that despite his Aryan appearance he was not of 'pure blood'.

Stories of Heydrich's Jewish descent were fed by a listing in a 1916 music encyclopaedia about Heydrich's father, a famous opera singer. In the lexicon, his father was erroneously listed with the Jewish-sounding surname Süss as a hyphenated prefix to his actual surname, giving Süss-Heydrich.

Based on this error, Hitler ordered an investigation into the Gestapo chief's background. To Heydrich's relief, Germany's leading racial expert, Dr Achim Gercke, concluded that Heydrich was "of German origin and free from any admixture of coloured or Jewish blood". However, Heydrich remained so troubled by the rumours that he hired renowned genealogist Ernst Hoffmann to help dispel them.

For several years, the genealogist met regularly at Heydrich's office to brief him on his research – and each time the usually icy Heydrich greeted him nervously: "To judge by the way he looked at me whenever I arrived at his office, his doubts were evident," Hoffmann wrote.

The Nazi leadership took full advantage of the doubts over Heydrich's past. To Himmler, Hitler remarked: "His non-Aryan origin will suit us admirably. He will be eternally grateful to us for having retained him, and will obey us blindly."


Musik-Lexikon

von

Dr. Hugo Riemann,

Lehrer am Konservatorium zu Hamburg.

Theorie und Geschichte der Musik,

die Tonkünstler alter und neuer Zeit mit Angabe ihrer Werke,

nebst einer vollständigen Instrumentenkunde.

Leipzig

Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts

1882.

Dr Hugo Riemann's musical lexicon fed rumours of Heydrich's ancestry.

two at close quarters. Yet despite their closeness, Heydrich insisted on addressing Himmler with "Sie", the formal form of "you", as he feared the personal form ("Du") would weaken the strength of his arguments in the mind of his superior.

According to Kersten, at times Himmler seemed almost "raped mentally" after reading a report from Heydrich. Instead of directly denying Heydrich's requests, Himmler would have a subordinate telephone Heydrich and inform him that Himmler would have to discuss the proposal with Hitler. "He would inform Heydrich later of his denial in the shape of an alleged Führer-Order," Kersten explained.

Planning the Holocaust

From this we can see that even Heydrich's immediate superior avoided direct confrontations with his second-in-command, and Heydrich was feared even more by his own employees. He was ice cold, focused and always had his eyes rigidly on the prize: to pave the way for the Führer's vision of a Greater Germanic Reich. As one of the party's visionaries, Heydrich was already convinced in the late 1930s that a natural consequence of Germany's expansion was the elimination of Europe's Jews. Whether that meant deporting them to Madagascar or Siberia or exterminating them with bullets or gas – all options that Heydrich considered – was a mere detail. What was most important to him was that the plan worked. For a long time, he struggled with the logistical problems of his scheme, but finally, in January 1942, he was able to proudly present 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question' in a villa in the Berlin district of Wannsee.

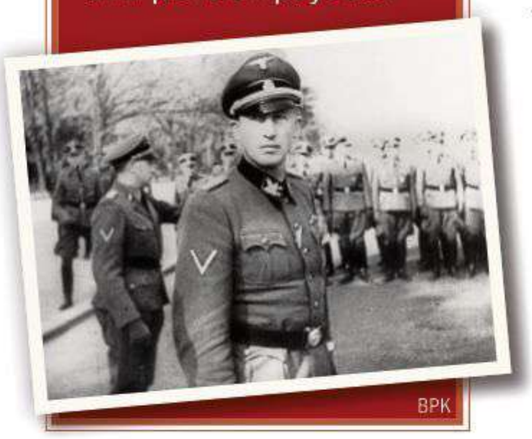
For Heydrich, the Wannsee Conference was his greatest achievement. His master plan was complete in every detail. Europe's Jews had been counted, and the concentration camps made ready. The rail network was performing well, and the Zyklon B gas had proved extremely efficient. With the approval of Hitler and Himmler, Heydrich could bring the Holocaust to fruition.

At the same time, Heydrich was personally selected by Hitler to take control of the troubled protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (today's Czech Republic). Due to the extensive armament production in Bohemia, it was particularly crucial that the Führer kept the area under tight control. Konstantin von Neurath, Heydrich's predecessor, was stripped of his executive powers due to his perceived inability to keep the Czechs on a sufficiently short leash; Heydrich was sent in as his 'deputy' to crush local dissent in September 1941.

HEYDRICH

GOVERNOR OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

During his tenure as governor, Heydrich pacified the previously unruly province. The resistance movement was crushed, and civilians were placated with boons, such as increased food rations and pension payouts.


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The king of Prague

Heydrich ruled with an iron fist. During a speech to his staff shortly after assuming power, he explained that the Czechs could be divided into two groups: one half could be Germanised, while the other half would be deported to Siberia once the Soviet Union had been annexed to the Reich. In order to separate the 'good' from the 'bad', Heydrich managed his protectorate with a

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The damage to Heydrich and his Mercedes was limited, but the metal shrapnel from the explosion left him with fatal sepsis.

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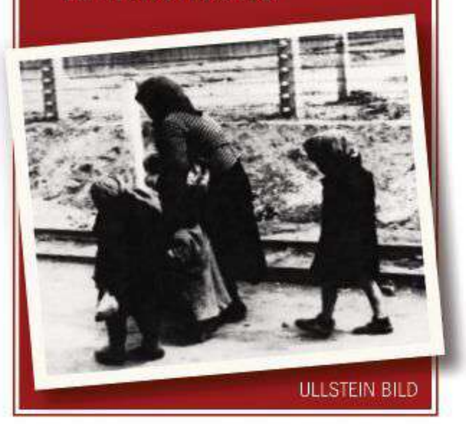
Reinhard's sons: eight-year-old Klaus (right) and his brother Heider, seven, at their father's state funeral. Klaus died in a traffic accident in 1942; Heider died in 2007.

well-calculated mix of carrot and stick: he immediately declared a state of emergency and forcibly repressed the well-established Czech resistance movement. By February 1942, between four and five hundred people had been executed, and more than four thousand had passed through the Gestapo's torture cells as the deportation of Prague's Jews began. Czech Prime Minister Alois Elias was arrested just hours after Heydrich's arrival, and within a week he had been sentenced to death. His sentence was carried out in June 1942.

In order to ease the mood, Heydrich increased food rations, established soup kitchens for the poor, facilitated access to tobacco and initiated an intensive crackdown on the black market, whose traders were loathed by the population. The new governor also took the time to receive workers' representatives at Prague's Hradcany Castle, addressing them as "comrades at work" and promising to meet their demands.

HEYDRICH
ARCHITECT OF THE HOLOCAUST

In his role as head of the Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration, Heydrich developed a precise plan for deporting and exterminating Europe's 11 million Jews.



ULLSTEIN BILD

The man who feared no one

The strategy appeared to pay off – tensions among the general public were easing, while the resistance movement was decimated in a matter of months: its leaders were out of the picture and the public were too afraid to support it.

Following this success, Heydrich installed himself and his family in the Panenské Brežany chateau north of Prague. Here, he began a comfortable life as the Germanic master of the Czechs, while commuting twice a week to Berlin to take care of his duties as chief of the Reich's security services. Proud, arrogant and convinced of the full subjugation of his Czech subjects, Heydrich travelled around Prague without protection in an open-top car. Because, as he himself reasoned, "Why should my Czechs shoot me?"

Death in Prague

When Heydrich raised his gun on the Prague street corner and aimed it at Jozef Gabcík, the concentration camps' gas chambers had only just come into operation, and the Führer's plans for a racially pure German empire still seemed to be feasible.

But Heydrich never saw his plans realised. As he pulled the trigger on his empty gun, Gabcík's comrade Jan Kubiš threw one of his bombs at the black Mercedes.

The throw was too short – the bomb exploded near the right rear wheel of the car, but it was enough: the explosion caused metal shrapnel from the car and horse hair from the upholstered seat to pierce Heydrich's back.

Although Heydrich – so the story goes – pursued his assailants, he soon collapsed on a street corner. The Gestapo boss was immediately taken to the nearby Bulovka hospital. Although initially it seemed like he would make a good recovery, he later fell into a coma from which he never recovered. Reinhard Heydrich died on 4th June from sepsis. The architect of the Holocaust was no more.

CZECH VILLAGES PAID THE PRICE FOR DEATH

Adolf Hitler considered Heydrich a shining star of the Nazi party, and in a fit of rage he ordered brutal reprisals following his assassination. Any town associated with the killers would feel Hitler's anger.

The Czech resistance movement's attack on Heydrich enraged Hitler like nothing before. On 9th June 1942 – just five days after Heydrich's death – he issued a direct order to the SS leadership in Prague.

In any village that had housed Heydrich's murderers, the SS were to execute all the men, send the women to concentration camps and any Aryan-looking children to Germany. After that the towns were to be obliterated and levelled.

German intelligence believed that the assassins came from the small Czech village of Lidice outside Prague, and they quickly set about extracting their revenge.

They executed the village's 173 men in groups of five near a barn; at the same time, they deported all 198 women to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and 105 of the village's children to the Lodz ghetto. Youngsters with blonde hair and blue eyes were sent to be 'Germanised', a process that involved their adoption by SS-approved families in Germany.

Lidice was then burned to the ground and the village ruins were flattened. The same fate befell the small quarry town of Ležáky, where one of the leaders who planned the attack originated. But Hitler's revenge didn't stop there. The Nazis imposed the death penalty on anyone who so much as welcomed Heydrich's murder, and thousands of Czechs came under suspicion of cooperating with the resistance movement. A total of 13,000 were arrested, deported to the concentration camps or executed.

The horrors and violence of the summer of 1942 were subsequently named the 'Heydrichiade' by Czechs.



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The 600-year-old, idyllic village of Lidice with its 500 inhabitants lay 22 km north-west of Prague.



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Over the course of two days, the SS destroyed the village before engineer troops removed all traces of Lidice.

TOPFOTO

All men were shot in reprisal for Heydrich's murder.

Killers managed to commit suicide

For three weeks, the Gestapo hunted the two assassins Jan Kubiš (top right) and Jozef Gabcík (bottom right).

After a tip-off from a traitor in the Czech resistance, an 800-strong SS and Gestapo force stormed the church where the two men had taken refuge early on the morning of 18th June 1942. Realising that the exchange of fire that followed was futile, all but one of the resistance fighters committed suicide to avoid capture by vengeful Nazis.

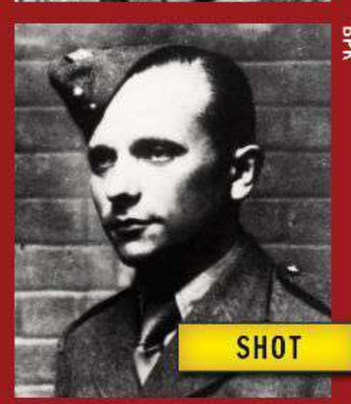


ULLSTEIN BILD

The Gestapo exhibited a bicycle one of the assassin's had to used to flee, the case containing the bombs and Gabcík's raincoat; they also offered a generous reward.



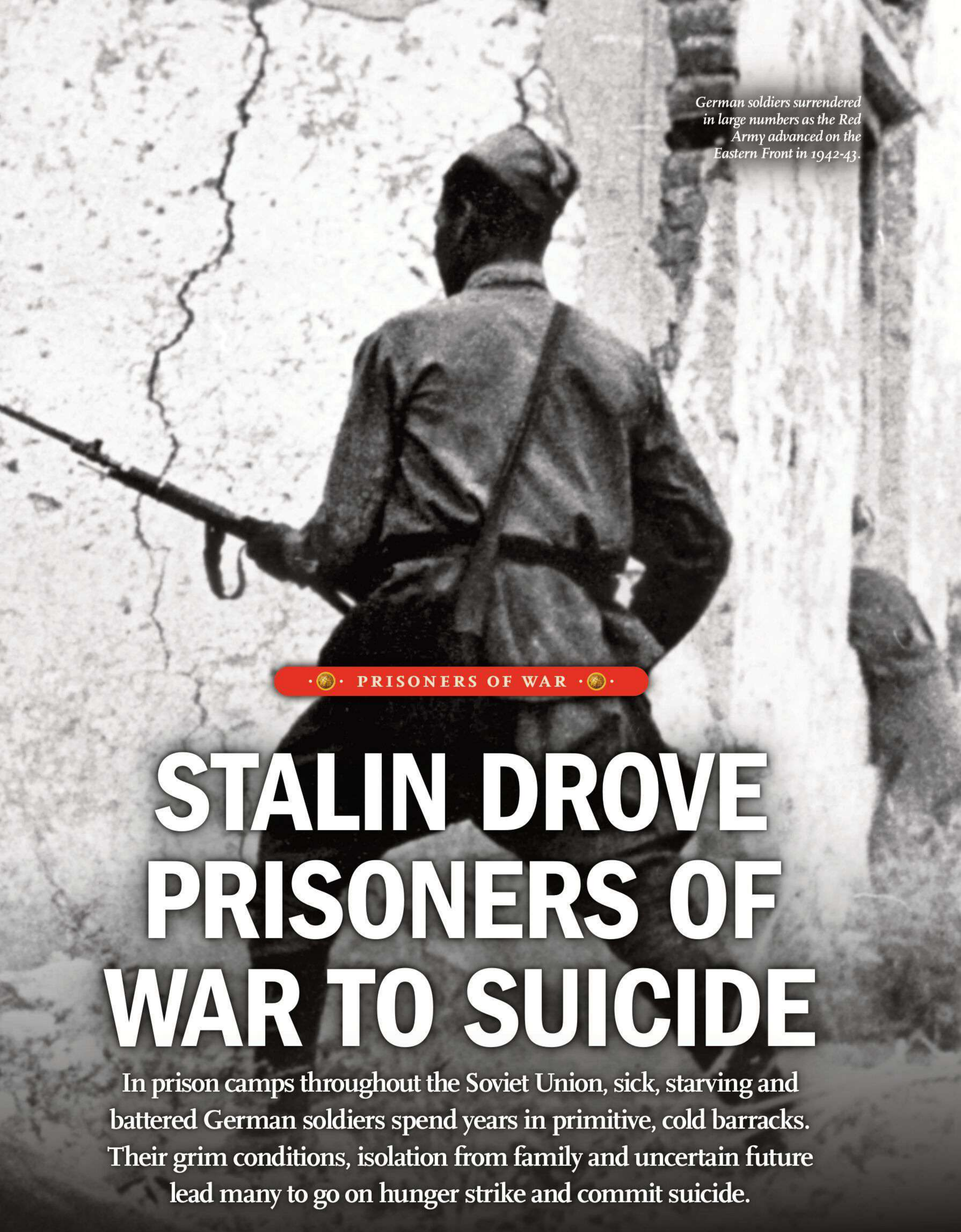
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1943

25TH MARCH



German soldiers surrendered in large numbers as the Red Army advanced on the Eastern Front in 1942-43.

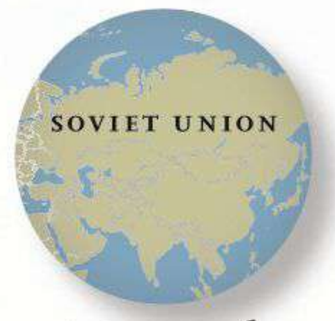
PRISONERS OF WAR

STALIN DROVE PRISONERS OF WAR TO SUICIDE

In prison camps throughout the Soviet Union, sick, starving and battered German soldiers spend years in primitive, cold barracks. Their grim conditions, isolation from family and uncertain future lead many to go on hunger strike and commit suicide.

Soviet Union, 1943

THE STAGE IS SET



In 1943 Hitler's war machine suffers a humiliating defeat at Stalingrad; over 90,000 German soldiers are made prisoners of war and sent to camps around the Soviet Union. One of the POWs is Captain Adelbert Holl, an officer who is about to endure seven years of torment in Stalin's brutal camp system.

WHERE AM I? WHY IS MY HEAD SO HOT, MY THROAT SO DRY?? What stinks so much here?" Questions flooded German Captain Adelbert Holl's mind as he regained consciousness and groggily looked around the small room. As he roused himself, he realised with a shock that seven of the prisoners with whom he was sharing a space had died, victims of illness or hunger. He himself was suffering from typhus and malnutrition, and his chances of surviving in the Yelabuga prison camp, 1,000 kilometres east of Moscow, were small. Holl, however, refused to die.

A fortnight earlier, Soviet troops had captured the 24-year-old officer at Stalingrad. One day, while he was in a dugout one of his men had burst in shouting, "Captain, they are coming!"

A few moments later, Holl heard uproar and Russian voices in front of the foxhole. Suddenly a Soviet soldier with a machinegun was standing before him. The Russian shouted incomprehensible orders, but Holl's senior sergeant, Josef Pawellek, understood the language and translated the words: "Lay down your weapons immediately! Abandon all resistance! Fall in outside in front of the dugout!"

Holl was worried about how the enemy would treat wounded German soldiers. He noticed the concern in the injured men's eyes as they lay on their stretchers – they knew they would be left behind. Outside, the captain joined the rest of the captured Germans. Soon, they were ordered to leave. Ahead of them lay a relentless hike through a deserted, snow-covered landscape in minus 30 degrees Celsius temperatures.

PRISONERS BEGIN THEIR DEATH MARCH

For weeks, Holl and his comrades marched in long columns towards their new Soviet prison camp. The guards pistol-whipped exhausted prisoners who lagged behind and shot anyone who tried to escape from the column.

Holl often acted as a rear guard, trying to help some of the weaker prisoners. But gradually, more and more Germans were left lifeless by the roadside. The captain eventually fell sick himself. By the time the prisoners reached the camp in



Captured German soldiers walked for days in kilometre-long columns to Stalin's prison camps.

Yelabuga – a facility surrounded by four-metre-high walls, a barbed wire fence and watchtowers – he had a high fever. Upon arrival, the guards quickly confiscated the prisoners' few valuables. The Russians also shaved the soldiers' heads and body hair before smothering them in a smelly substance to keep the masses of lice at bay.

Finally, the Germans were given a bath and their old clothes were taken away – Holl and his comrades had been transformed from German soldiers to POWs in the Soviet Union's huge prison camp system.



The POWs' bunks were packed tightly together in the unsanitary barracks, where disease flourished.



German POWs were put to work felling trees, breaking stones and cultivating land.

Soldiers ended up in squalid camps

From the start of the war until the mid-1950s, there were more than four million prisoners in five hundred of these camps, which were referred to by the acronym GUPVI. According to Soviet sources, 2,571,600 of the POWs were German soldiers. The majority spent more than six years in the camps and 450,600 died. But German historian Rüdiger Overmans believes the death toll was closer to 1.1 million.

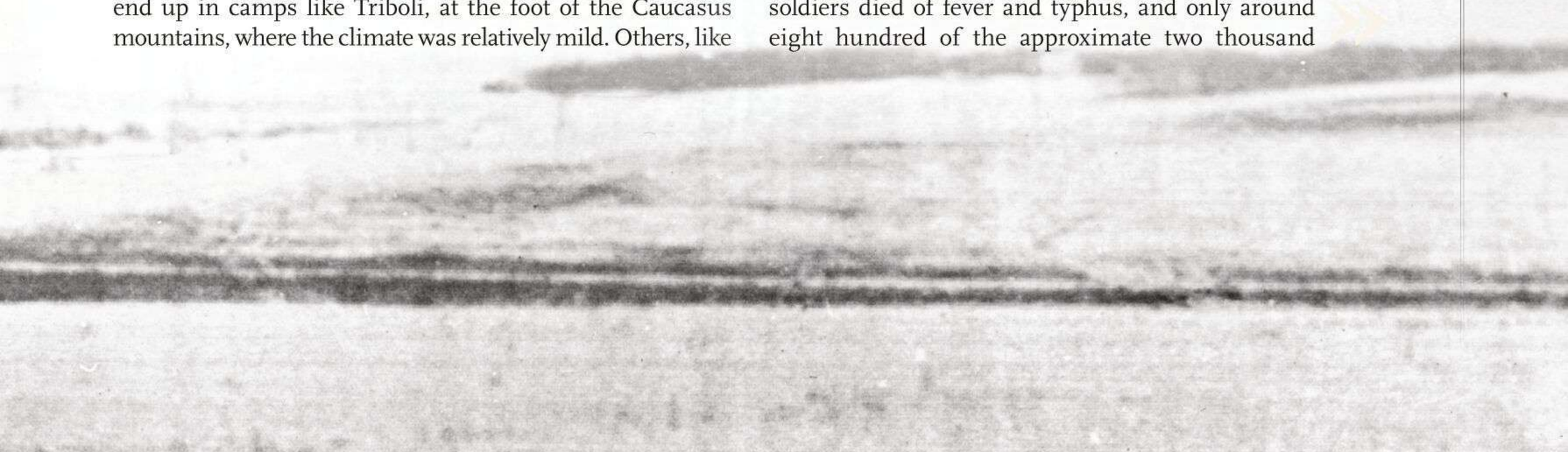
The camps were characterised by exhausting work, inadequate food and high mortality rates. Many detainees died from typhus and malnutrition, and the prison guards were also capable of beating prisoners to death. If someone tried to escape, they were shot dead. The miserable conditions and the lack of any prospect of release led inmates to drown themselves in cesspits or deliberately run toward the camp's barbed wire fences in order to be shot.

Some German prisoners of war were fortunate enough to end up in camps like Triboli, at the foot of the Caucasus mountains, where the climate was relatively mild. Others, like Adelbert Holl, had the misfortune to spend their prison life toiling in the biting cold of the Soviet Union's central region. Some camps were built of wood or stone and furnished with tightly packed, three-tier bunk beds. But in many places, the prisoners shivered in tents or poorly constructed shacks that were incapable of keeping out the Russian winter.

A lack of hygiene, inadequate diet and illness soon weakened Holl and his fellow prisoners.

Russians tried to convert the prisoners

As the weeks went by, Holl became more and more emaciated: his limbs became as thin as a child's. All around him, fellow soldiers died of fever and typhus, and only around eight hundred of the approximate two thousand



Stalin set up over 500 camps

The Soviet Union had more than five hundred prison camps, from the Baltic in the west to Siberia in the east. When German soldiers were captured by the Red Army, they were taken to one of them and made to work in everything from forestry to industrial reconstruction.

Prisoners rebuilt a railway workshop

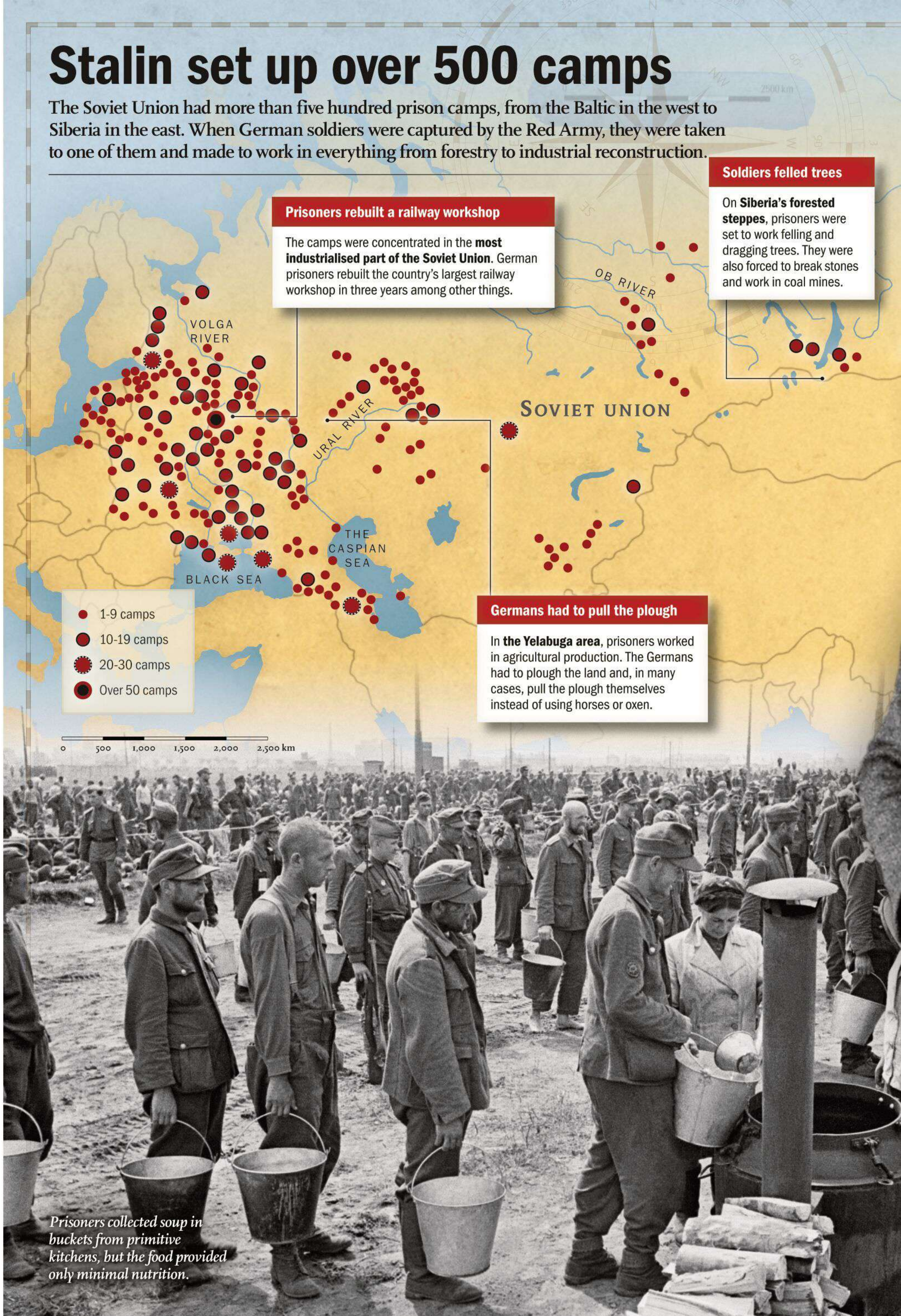
The camps were concentrated in the **most industrialised part of the Soviet Union**. German prisoners rebuilt the country's largest railway workshop in three years among other things.

Soldiers felled trees

On **Siberia's forested steppes**, prisoners were set to work felling and dragging trees. They were also forced to break stones and work in coal mines.

Germans had to pull the plough

In **the Yelabuga area**, prisoners worked in agricultural production. The Germans had to plough the land and, in many cases, pull the plough themselves instead of using horses or oxen.



Prisoners collected soup in buckets from primitive kitchens, but the food provided only minimal nutrition.



A large part of the prisoners' daily diet consisted of a few hundred grams of bread.

prisoners who reached Yelabuga survived the first few months of captivity; Holl was one of them.

Every morning, the prisoners had to stand in the courtyard to be counted. In addition, the dormitories were raided, and inmates searched. If the prison guards found anything of value, the items were confiscated. Inmates were punished with beatings or solitary confinement in a claustrophobic cell.

If the Russians suspected a planned escape, or if prisoners were derogatory about Communist rule, they were subjected to hour-long and repeated interrogations. Interrogators tried to elicit the truth by offering bread covered in sugar or by beating the prisoners. Another approach was to put the Germans in an increasingly hot room while wearing all their clothes or placing naked prisoners outside the barracks in the biting cold.

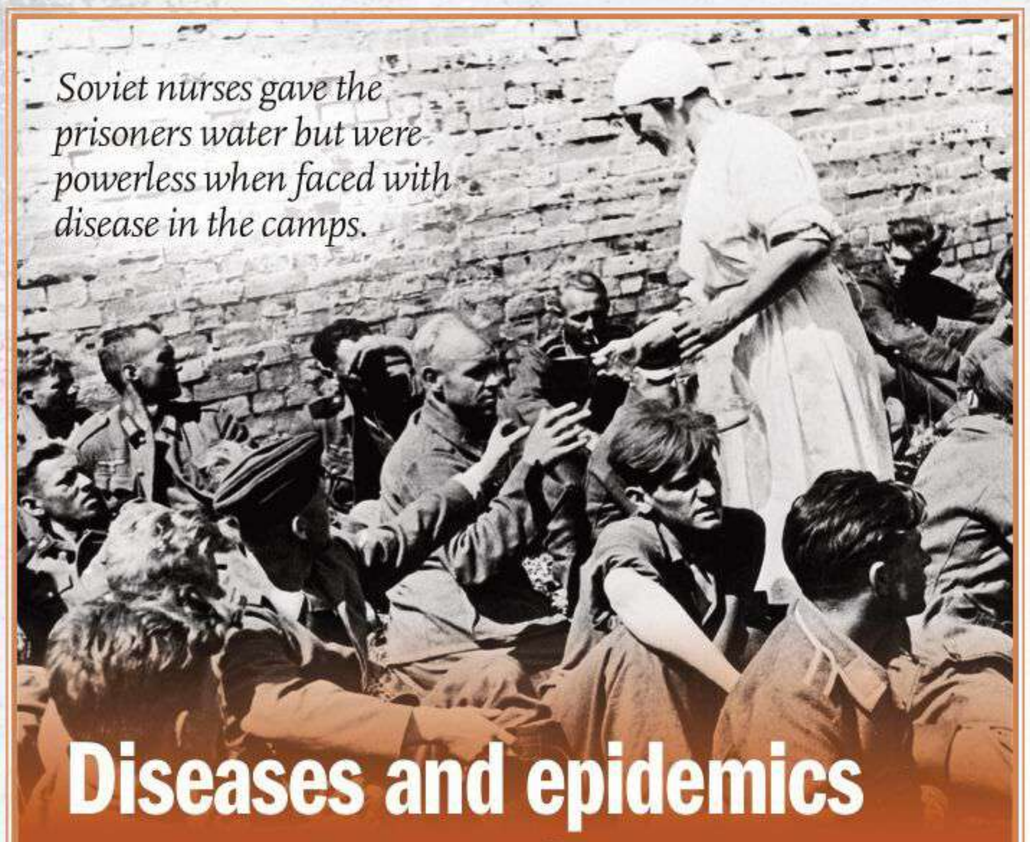
Holl was among those interrogated, during which the Russians tried to make him convert to Communism. Indeed, the entire camp staff made concerted efforts to indoctrinate the prisoners with Soviet state ideology by showing propaganda films, handing out Communist newspapers and broadcasting political speeches.

In 1943, German army officers in the camps established two organisations: the *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* (NKFD, or National Committee for a Free Germany) and the *Bund Deutscher Offiziere* (BDO, or League of German Officers). These organisations spread anti-Nazi and pro-Soviet propaganda to German soldiers in the camps and at the front via newspapers, radio broadcasts and leaflets.

The NKFD and BDO recruited POWs on a large scale, and the number of members increased as Germany's final defeat loomed ever nearer. Many prisoners had difficulty resisting, particularly as they were rewarded with privileges – for example, larger food rations – if they joined.

Adelbert Holl, however, perceived the 'conversions' as treason and resisted the Russians' indoctrination measures. The captain instead founded a community of prisoners who shared his opinion. The pro- and anti-Nazi groups hated one another, and the sentiment fostered great distrust in the camps: informers were quick to convey unguarded comments to the camp's guards. Holl was charged with anti-Soviet propaganda

The prisoners' thin uniforms offered little protection against the harsh winter cold of the Soviet Union.



Soviet nurses gave the prisoners water but were powerless when faced with disease in the camps.

Diseases and epidemics ravaged the prisoners

Up to one million Germans lost their lives in Soviet prison camps. It was disease in particular that thinned out the prison population.

Food shortages and malnutrition made German POWs extremely susceptible to disease. One particular scourge was scrub typhus, which was spread rapidly by disease-carrying lice, killing thousands of inmates.

Pneumonia, malaria, measles and smallpox flourished in the barracks. Many Germans also died of dysentery or were plagued by dehydration and diarrhoea. The Russians tried to contain the epidemics by isolating the sick in specific camp areas but, given the lack of hygiene, they were powerless to stop the spread of disease.

in the summer of 1943, but after one month in solitary, repeated interrogations and reduced food rations, the Russians realised he was not about to crack. Instead, Holl was transferred in September 1943 to Kama camp, another GUPVI in the same town.

Prisoners supported each other

The conditions in Kama were even worse. Six-metre-high walls and a barbed wire fence surrounded the prison. The inmates were given only one hour of fresh air a day during their morning exercise. In addition, the camp staff distributed so little firewood that the prisoners could not keep warm. The inmates had to secretly cut planks of wood from parts of the barracks to heat the cold rooms.

Holl spent time writing poems and learning Russian and English. In addition, he discussed German literature with other prisoners and played chess and dice games. But the officer had difficulty maintaining his optimism in the face of the ever-more disheartening news of German defeats.

However, the prisoners' unity helped to keep spirits up. When an inmate had a birthday, his comrades would give part of their bread ration to the celebrant. The Germans also stood together in an attempt to pressure the camp's staff into improving conditions. For example, in the spring of 1944, 32 prisoners went on hunger strike in the Kama camp to protest the fact that prison guards had blocked their barrack windows. The strike led to the windows being partially uncovered to let in some light.

The Russians tried to weaken the group by moving Holl, who had participated in several hunger strikes, back to the first camp. They also tried a new tactic: the Russians put the officer to work – a burden that the German, unlike many fellow prisoners, had so far avoided.

Soldiers had to rebuild Stalin's realm

During the war, hard work was part of everyday life for the German prisoners, but the situation didn't change with Germany's surrender on 9th May 1945. In fact, the Soviets increased their demands. Germans of all ranks were expected to help rebuild the Soviet Union after the war. To that end, the prisoners were put to work in factories, forests and coal mines.

There was a high demand for prisoners with technical skills, who could – over several years – advance from basic mechanic to foreman level. Some work teams grew to include 100 men – working in multiple roles from crane operators and mechanics to welders, masons and scaffolders. These teams erected hospitals and buildings for the security service.

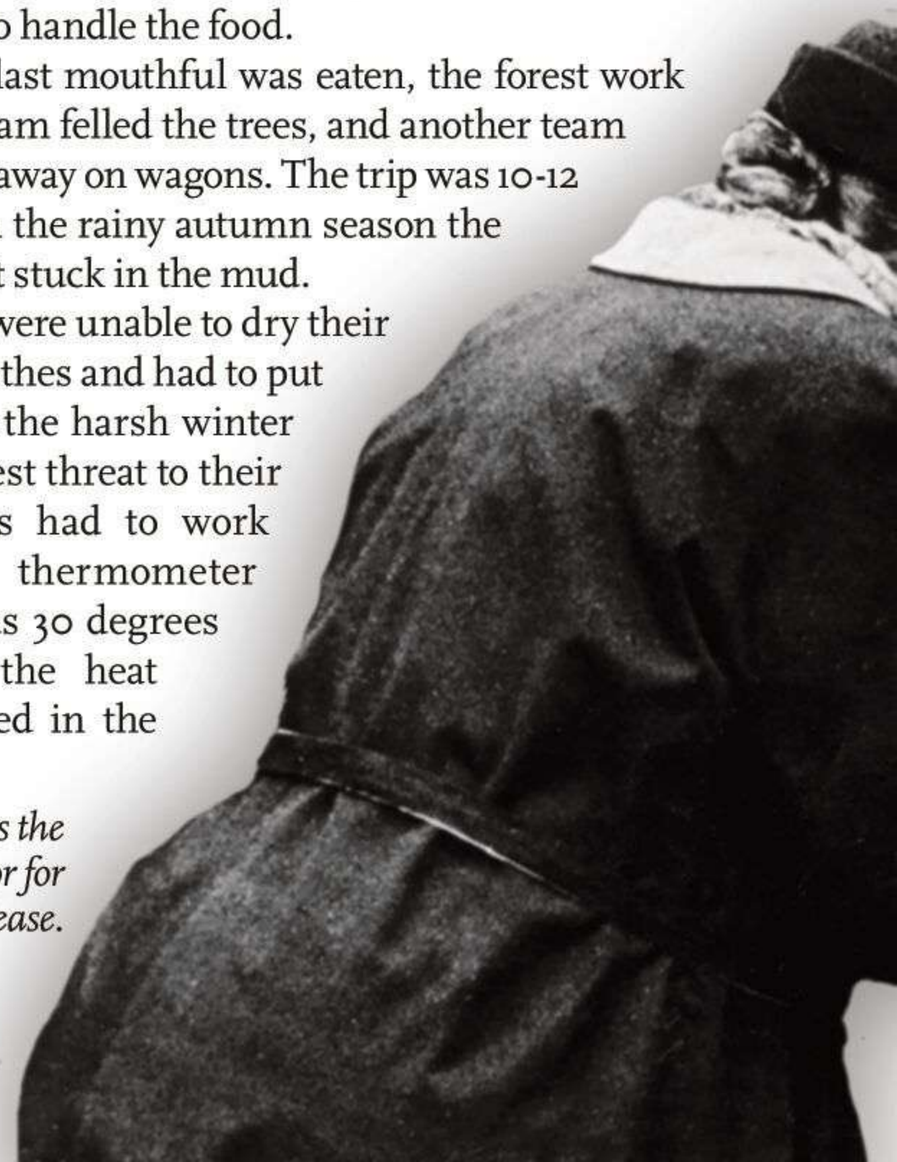
However, Adelbert Holl's first job was very simple. The captain had to keep the courtyard in front of his prison barracks clean and gather straw. Shortly after the end of the war, the officer was once more sent to the Kama camp, from where prisoners marched in long lines every day to jobs west of the city. His new job was to plough 100 square metres of Russian steppe every day. The ploughed area would end up being 2,000 hectares in size, and sown with potatoes. Fourteen prisoners pulled the plough in place of animals, with the working day easily extending to over ten hours.

However, the captain soon swapped his agriculture work for forestry job when the Russians sent him to the Xiltau Woodland Camp. The primitive camp was extremely overcrowded and consisted of a wooden hut, some tents, a field kitchen and latrines.

Only a few inmates had tin bowls and spoons. After the Russians distributed lunch – a single slice of bread with ham, 40 grams of sugar and a serving of pea or barley soup – many prisoners were forced to borrow other prisoners' utensils or use their fingers to handle the food.

As soon as the last mouthful was eaten, the forest work continued. One team felled the trees, and another team pulled the trunks away on wagons. The trip was 10-12 kilometres, and in the rainy autumn season the carriages often got stuck in the mud.

The prisoners' were unable to dry their wet and greasy clothes and had to put them on wet, but the harsh winter cold was the biggest threat to their survival; inmates had to work even when the thermometer dropped to minus 30 degrees Celsius. When the heat eventually returned in the



A mother thanks the German Chancellor for her son's release.

spring of 1946, Holl was moved to a camp in the town of Zelenodolsk, where he had to cut timber at a factory, carry 60 kg sacks of flour from a mill to a bakery and help to empty the cargo from trains that arrived at the station.

The work was made harder because – as in the earlier camps – Holl and his fellow prisoners were seriously undernourished.

Red Cross packages never reached the prisoners

Unless the Germans met a certain work quota, the Russians cut their daily bread ration from 500-600 grams to just 400. In addition to bread, the food consisted of three servings of cauliflower soup. There was no meat other than an occasional scrap of fish.

Although the Red Cross sent relief packages to the camps marked "Only for prisoners of war in the Soviet Union", Holl never saw the packages, which ended up for sale in Soviet markets.

Prisoners who worked in agriculture might be lucky to steal a few potatoes or a sack of flour when the guards weren't looking. The potatoes were eaten raw and the flour could be sold or exchanged for bread. The inmates also collected mushrooms, weeds and grass to thicken the watery soup.

The prisoners were paid wages that could be used to buy extra food. But they were paid very little. Some working groups pooled their food and money and distributed everything – more or less equally – among themselves. The Germans also exchanged goods and made trades to gain extra bread or tobacco. No prisoner could hold more than 150 roubles – the Russians linked larger amounts with potential plans to flee.



Only a few prisoners had their own cookware and had to borrow cutlery or eat with their fingers.

However, prisoner escapes were not very likely. The road to Germany was long, the prisoners were physically weak, and their Russian language skills poor. The likelihood of being discovered was high.

The frustration over camp internment grew day by day and the prisoners also had to learn to overcome the emotional distress of being parted from their families.

Holl received a promise of release

Adelbert Holl became increasingly bitter during his captivity, but he tried to rein in any dreams of freedom for the sake of his sanity. It wasn't until January 1946 that the captain and his fellow prisoners were permitted to send letters home. Six months later, Holl received a reply and pictures from his wife. At the same time, the German officer continued his endless journey from one inhuman work camp to another. But in the spring of 1947, the former captain was informed that his situation was about to improve. At a work camp in Saporozhye, Ukraine, Holl was told that all German prisoners of war would be sent home by the end of 1948. However, after several years of Soviet lies and propaganda, the officer doubted the information – and rightly so. The detainees could see from the camp



1876-1967

NAME KONRAD ADENAUER

TITLE CHANCELLOR OF WEST GERMANY

Chancellor brought prisoners home

By the end of 1950, almost 30,000 German prisoners of war were still being held in Soviet prison camps. The Russians regarded the inmates as war criminals and viewed the prisoners' work as compensation for war damage. West Germany's first Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, worked hard to get the prisoners repatriated. However, it was only after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 that the German government could begin conclusive negotiations to bring its soldiers home. In 1955, the chancellor travelled to Moscow to meet with the Soviet Union's leader, Nikita Khrushchev. The visit led to West Germany opening diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, who in turn returned the last 15,000 German prisoners.

Konrad Adenauer was Federal Chancellor until 1963 and was the longest reigning chancellor since Otto von Bismarck.

- **Studied in Freiburg, Munich and Bonn.**
- **Was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1934 and 1944.**



When German POWs were released, the long journey back to Germany often began by train. If the prisoners had been interned in eastern Siberia, the return journey stretched for many thousands of miles, and the Germans had to stay in transit camps along the way.

newspaper's reports how few prisoners had been repatriated, and pessimism spread. By the end of 1948, nearly half a million German POWs were still in the Soviet Union. As a result of his disappointment at not being sent home, Holl decided to stop working – a choice that would have serious repercussions.

Captain was convicted of sabotage

His one-man strike led to a charge of sabotage. The Russians put Holl on trial in the local courthouse, and the sentence was eight years in prison. He was sent by train to the wooded plains of Siberia, where he lived and worked in criminal camps (GULAGs) among convicts. Holl was not alone – around 20,000 German officers were sentenced to years of additional punishment often on trumped-up charges that the regime chose to class as sabotage.

For almost a year, the German officer worked digging boreholes, dragging tree trunks and breaking stones, which were used, among other things, to build a new stretch of railway. Food rations were as miserable as in previous camps, and Holl's knee joints began to swell due to vitamin deficiency. Eventually, he was unable to walk.

On 17th February 1950, the starved captain reported for work as usual: "Ah, welcome Holl!" his boss greeted him. "You can saw up the tree trunk lying outside. You know the lengths. By the way, you are going home tomorrow." It was the sentence Holl had been waiting to hear for seven years.

Along with 18 other German soldiers, the officer began the long journey home from Siberia. Along the way, Holl stayed in transit camps where more and more released Germans gathered until a total of 913 prisoners of war rolled west toward their final destination. In April 1950, the captain returned to Germany as a free man.

Back at the camps, almost 30,000 German prisoners of war were still being detained at the end of 1950. Following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer began negotiating the release of the remaining prisoners with the Soviet regime, and in 1956 the last German prisoners were released. Of the more than 90,000 soldiers who, like Adelbert Holl, were captured in Stalingrad, only around 6,000 returned home. The rest perished as a result of hunger, cold, sickness or overwork.



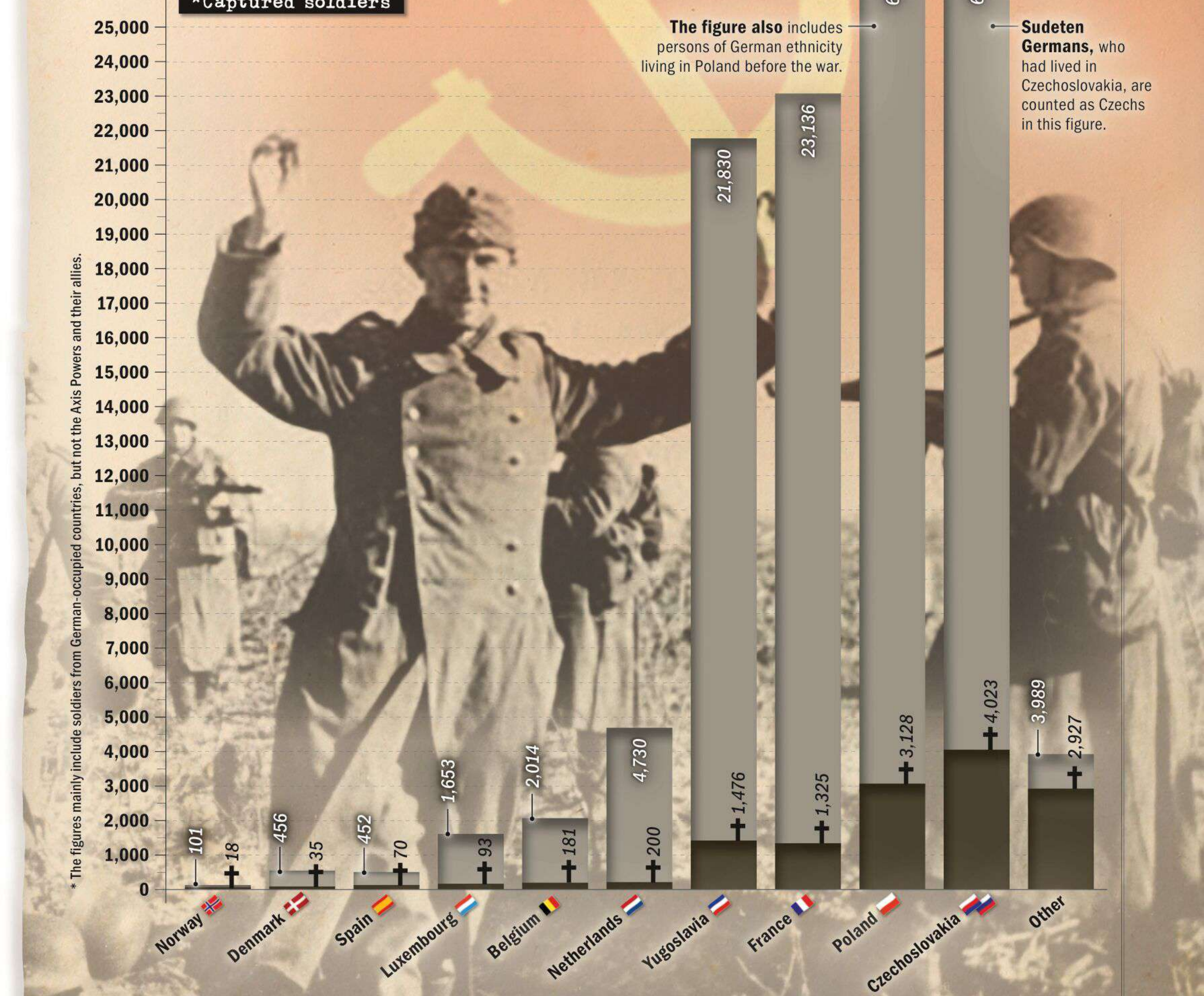
Prisoners of war in the Soviet Union were behind the anti-Nazi NKFD organisation.

Printed manifesto and membership card of the NKFD.

Volunteers ended up in camps

Over 2.5 million German soldiers ended up in Stalin's camps, where up to one in three perished. They were joined by young men from all over Europe who'd volunteered to join the crusade against Bolshevism.

Poles and Czechoslovakians were the largest non-German groups held prisoner



Hitler's defeat on the Eastern Front meant Soviet prison camps were overflowing with soldiers from all over Europe.

1943

JANUARY

Almost all the work had to be carried out by hand, because heavy machinery couldn't reach the jungle.

RAILROAD OF DEATH

WORKED TO DEATH IN THE JUNGLE

Endless forests, impassable mountains and billions of malaria-carrying mosquitoes made building a railway line between Thailand and Burma impossible – except for the Japanese military, who had plenty of POWs and little respect for the sanctity of human life.

Burma, 1943

THE STAGE IS SET



The Japanese have occupied Burma, but the former British colony can only be supplied by sea where submarines lurk. So, the Japanese plan to build a railway through the jungle from Thailand. British engineers have previously decreed the project to be impossible, but the Japanese have other ideas...

THE WORKERS BUILDING THE RAILWAY were near death from exhaustion and hunger. In desperation, in early January 1943, six of them decided to flee the Japanese camp. For three days, Lieutenant Colonel Philip Toosey, who was still imprisoned there, covered up the men's escape.

According to a fellow inmate, Toosey himself then reported the men as missing. "It was a clever ploy really because it looked as though he was on the guards' side." In reality, the officer was trying to protect the rest of the prisoners from Japanese reprisals.

The odds were against the escapees. Ahead lay a seemingly endless hike to the British lines in Burma (now Myanmar). After ten days on the run, four were recaptured and brought back to the camp. Toosey was allowed to speak with them briefly before they were loaded into a lorry and driven out of the camp and into the jungle. A few hours later, gunshots sounded in the distance. The men in the camp later learned that the men's executions had been delayed while they dug their own graves.

Meanwhile, Captain Eugene Pomeroy and Lieutenant Eric Howard were still on the run. The officers followed a river to avoid becoming lost. But they had to skirt around all the settlements: Europeans were easy to spot among the Thais, and the locals might give them up. The officers also struggled with malaria, and the days' marches became ever shorter.



Watches were valuable and could be bartered for food or clothes.

After 14 days, the escape bid ended. The pair were spotted by Thais, who reported them to the Japanese in exchange for a reward. Pomeroy and Howard were tortured for three days by the Kempeitai – Japan's answer to Gestapo – who wanted to know the names of all those who had helped the group escape. One prisoner at the camp recalled his concern at seeing them afterwards:

"It wasn't so much the fact that they were dishevelled. It was the look in their eyes, the hopelessness in their eyes. They knew they were finished."

Pomeroy and Howard were driven away from the camp, but no shots were heard this time.

"The local Thais and, subsequently, the Koreans, told us that they had been bayoneted," Toosey wrote after the war.

Pomeroy's and Howard's fate demonstrated that escape was impossible. The only choice remaining for the prisoners of war was to continue building the railway.

Supply routes were threatened

The work had been started a few months earlier, after events 8,000 kilometres away turned the war against Japan. In June 1942, the empire had sent a fleet across the Pacific, heading for the Midway Atoll. But the US had learned from Pearl Harbor and this time it was prepared. In the battle that followed, four Imperial aircraft carriers were sunk.

The Battle of Midway severely weakened Japan's naval power, and the empire suddenly found it difficult to protect its long maritime supply chains. Supporting their troops in Burma, which they had recently captured from the British, was particularly problematic. There were no railways linking Burma and Japan's other colonial outposts, so the empire decided that it had to build a line through the jungle and across mountains to connect the existing railway networks in Thailand. and Burma.

The British had considered a similar project in the past, but had deemed it impossible to sustain thousands of workers as they hacked



The workers had to avoid swallowing water because of the risk of cholera.



The camps were quickly set up and taken down as building moved on.



In late 1943, the first trains ran along the entire route.

Unstable bridges and viaducts made the railway vulnerable. The Japanese were forced to keep prisoners of war along the route to repair the inevitable damage when structures collapsed due to shoddy construction or Allied airstrikes.

their way through endless forests to lay the tracks necessary to form the link.

But Japan's military commanders had a different view of human needs, and had a plentiful supply of labour. In Singapore, 80,000 British, Australian and Indian prisoners of war were sitting idly behind barbed wire fences, and providing almost no return for their meagre diet.

One of those prisoners was Toosey, who had led an artillery regiment during the failed defence of the city. After surrendering Singapore, the British generals had been taken to Japan, so Toosey was suddenly among the camp's highest-ranking officers.

A bitter Lieutenant John Coast was farther down the hierarchy. His division had arrived in Singapore just two weeks before the colony fell, long past the point when his unit could have done anything to defend it.

The British prisoners of war soon learned that the Japanese had scant regard for the Geneva Convention's regulations concerning the proper treatment of prisoners and their rights: beatings were meted out at the slightest sign of rebellion and the men were fed nothing but rice, something that only a few of the British had tasted before.

"Once our first revulsion to eating the stuff at all was over, we had only two interests: to get more of it and to learn how to cook it decently", Coast wrote in his diary.

The journal was necessarily secret; paper and writing materials were strictly prohibited. Violating this rule resulted in brutal physical punishment, as did almost every other infraction. In between the beatings, the bored men swapped rumours. Some claimed that Japan could not feed so many prisoners of war and therefore intended to send them to a neutral country. Others had heard stories of a railway project further north.

The Japanese put a stop to the rumours

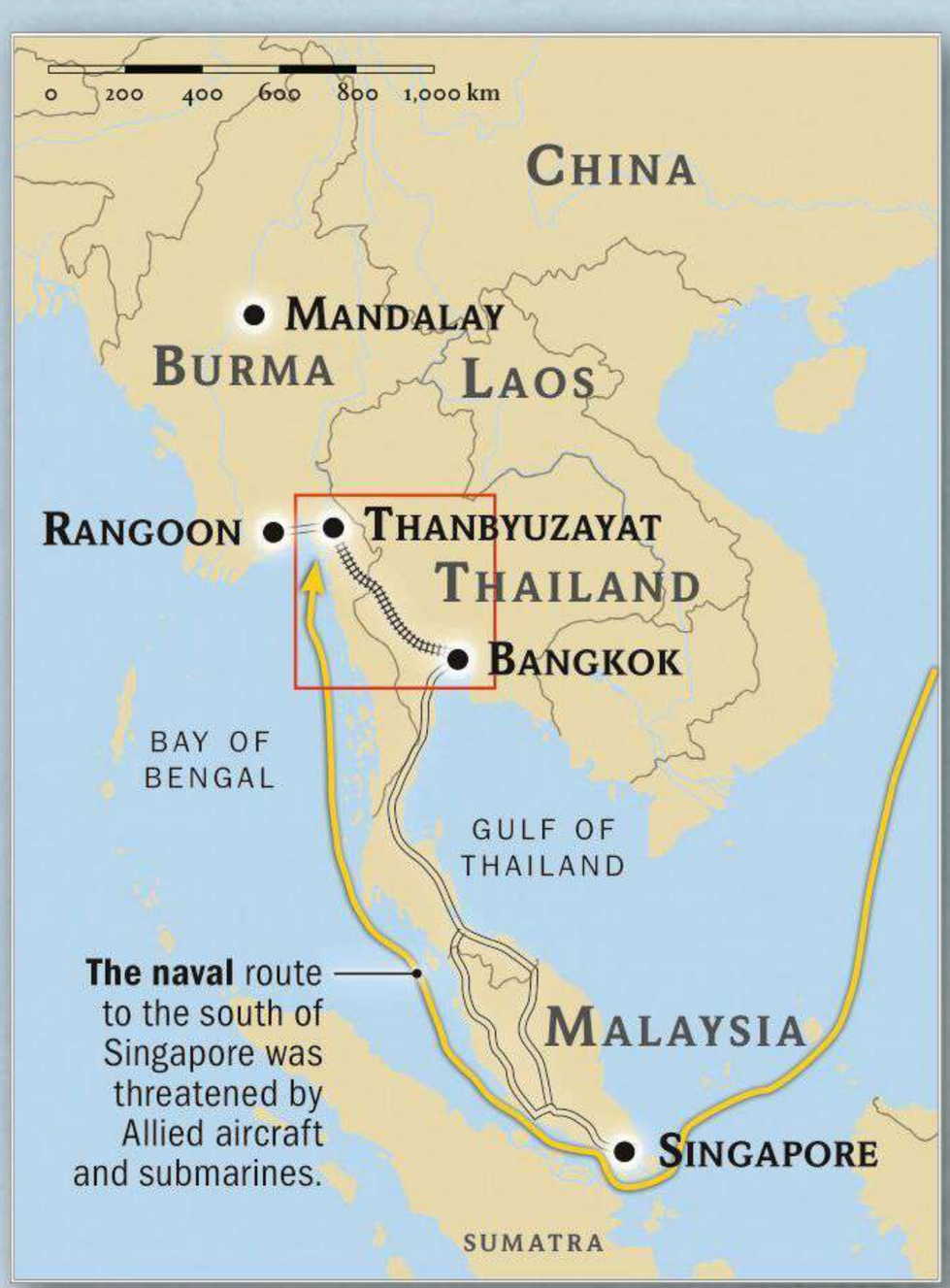
In the summer of 1942, the prisoners of war in Singapore received marching orders. The Japanese explanation was that the men were going north to camps with better conditions. In the highlands, the Europeans would be prey to fewer tropical diseases. They were also promised more food.

"Local Thais... told us that they had been bayoneted"

Post-war report by a British lieutenant colonel Philip Toosey

The Railroad of Death cut through the wilderness

Over 600 bridges were needed to link the front in Burma to other Japanese-held territories in Southeast Asia. Imperial engineers estimated that it would take years to build the railway, but the POWs were driven like slaves to finish the route in 16 months.



Naval threats made an overland route essential
The Japanese were struggling to supply and reinforce their troops in Burma by sea, so they decided to build a railway.

THANBYUZAYAT 2

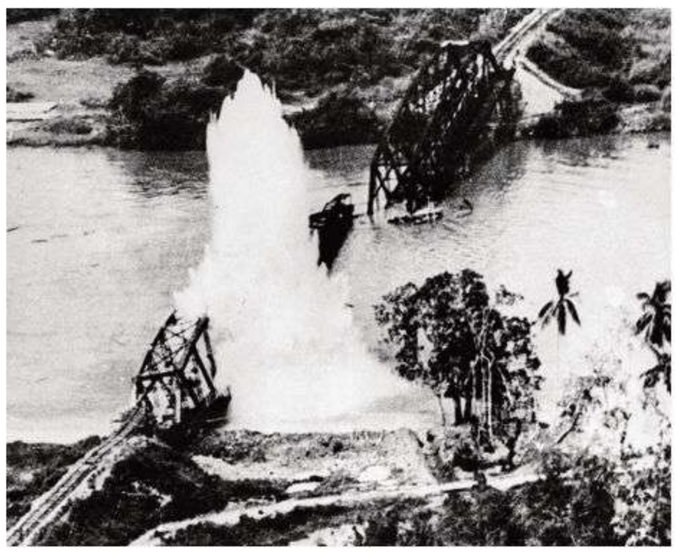
BAY OF BENGAL

2 Team two begins
On 1st October 1942, POWs begin to lay rails at Thanbyuzayat in Burma. These prisoners must build the track towards the south-east in the direction of the other team.

1 POWs are moved to Thailand
Construction work begins from both ends. In the south, a sign reading "0 kilometres" is knocked into the ground at Ban Pong on 5th June 1942. This is where the existing railway line ends.

Existing railway
The Burma railway

Native workers had even higher death rates than Western prisoners of war.

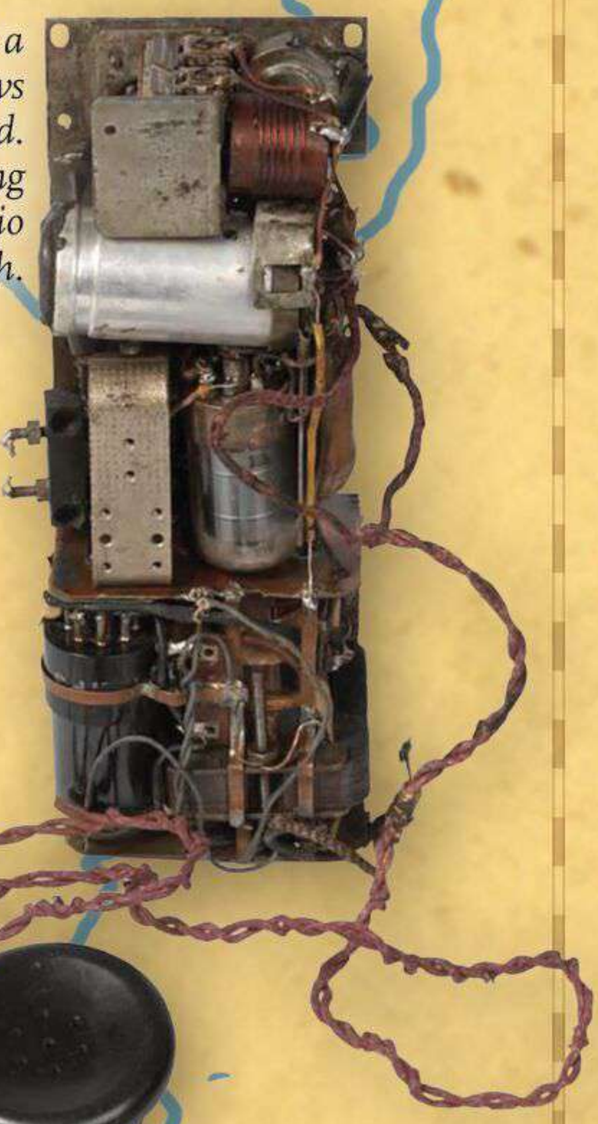


3 Tributary is crossed

Bridge 277 is built over a river the men believe is called the Kwai. In fact, *Khwae Yai* means big tributary in Thai. By February 1943 a wooden bridge is complete. A concrete version follows in June.

The bridges constructed over open water were especially vulnerable to Allied air raids.

The prisoners built a radio to hear news from the outside world. The penalty for being caught with a radio was death.



4 Track crosses the mountains

From Burma, the line leads into the Tenasserim Mountains, which mark the border with Thailand. The tracks are laid through the Three Pagodas Pass. Memorials and mass graves survive to this day.

5 Embankment supports the rails

At Wampo, cliffs climb vertically out of the Khwae Noi river. The Japanese engineers order the prisoners to build a 400-metre-long, timber-framed embankment alongside the bare rock face. The work takes 17 days.



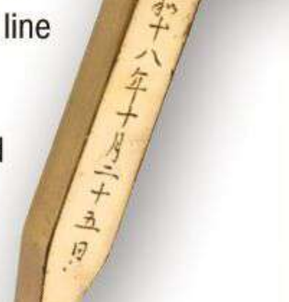
The embankment was constructed of wood – the only material they had in abundance.



7 The ends meet

The work parties meet on 17th October 1943 at Konkuita. After 16 months, the 415-km line is complete. Over 100,000 POWs and workers from occupied territories have paid for the line with their lives.

A gilded peg attached the final section of track. It marked the completion of the railway.



6 Rock formation blocks the route

The Japanese make the POWs carve a deep furrow through a rocky ridge. The work takes six gruelling weeks, and the unremitting effort required makes the soldiers name the place Hellfire Pass.

THREE PAGODAS PASS

MAE KLONG

KONKUITA

THAILAND

KHWAE NOI

HELLFIRE PASS

KHWAE YAI

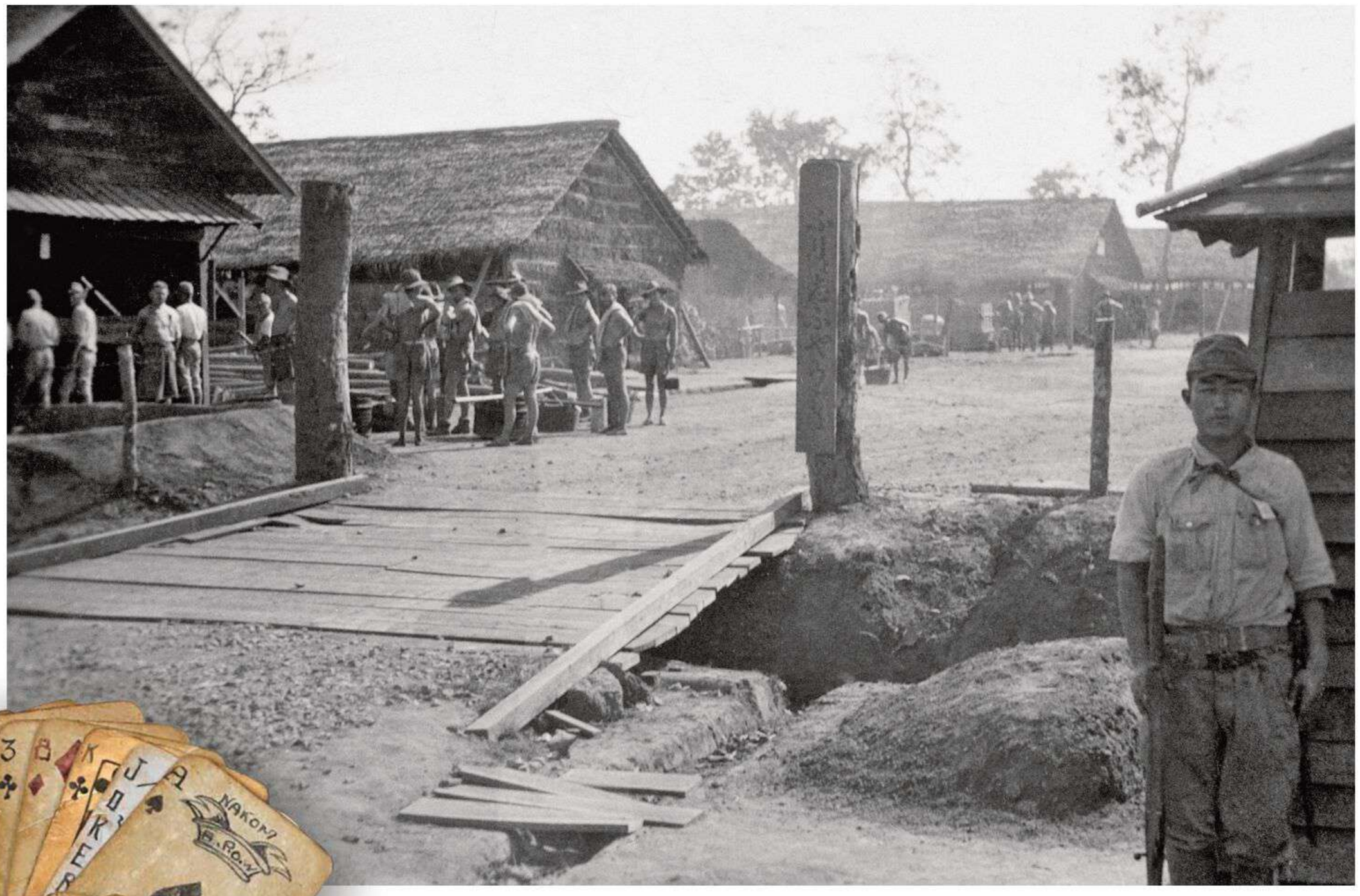
BURMA

WAMPO

BAN PONG

BANGKOK

0 10 20 30 40 50 km



The camp at Thanbyuzayat, the northern starting point for the railway, was later used as a transit camp for prisoners as well as an area hospital for seriously sick and injured workers from other camps.



Homemade playing cards were used in any free time the men had.

Trains carried a total of 60,000 men to Thailand, and the Japanese made sure that no rumours reached the prisoners of war who were still waiting to embark in Singapore. As a result, no one was prepared for the hell that awaited: the British would become slaves as they toiled to build a railway line that their own countrymen had declared impossible. On 5th June 1942, workers knocked a sign into the ground at Ban Pong, near Bangkok, where the existing rail network ended. It read "0 kilometres" and marked the beginning of a new line that would be cut into Thailand's jungle. In October, another force of prisoners of war started from the opposite end at Thanbyuzayat in Burma.

"No other nation of the world in 1943 would have bashed and bullied and sweated and slaved prisoners to such fantastic lengths for such an object," Coast wrote. However, the lieutenant's disgust at the Japanese officers' barbaric methods was mixed with a grudging admiration for their determination to overcome all obstacles.

The construction work consisted of several steps. First, prisoners of war cleared the trees along a path staked out by Japanese engineers. Once the trunks and roots had been removed, other workers began building the foundation on which the rails would rest. The height of the foundations ranged from just over one metre to six metres and consisted of soil taken from either side of the track. The soil was then planted with grass, so that the structure did not collapse during heavy rain. Eventually, the sleepers were laid and the rails bolted together. The track's poor foundations meant that they often started to sink and the prisoners were ordered to shore up the weak spots with extra soil and gravel.

Officers felt the squeeze

Despite the miserable conditions in the camps, the army's system of rank was respected and maintained. The officers were not expected to do any physical work – just to lead and direct the men. On the other hand, as intermediaries, they

"Speedo meant 'work very fast, or I'll hit you'"

Diary entry by British lieutenant John Coast

were frequently punished when the guards thought the work was progressing too slowly.

As a lieutenant colonel, Toosey was given command of a camp that served as a base for around 2,000 prisoners of war. Toosey made great efforts to cooperate with the Japanese and succeeded in preventing some cases of abuse as a result.

Toosey's abilities were put to the test when a quarrel broke out between his interpreter, a British captain named David Boyle, and a Korean prison guard. Japan had annexed Korea several decades before the war, which meant that its nationals were obliged to fight for the empire, but the Korean guards were treated as inferiors by the Japanese and tended to take their frustration out on anyone who ranked below them at the camp.

On this particular occasion, an uneducated Korean guard was insisting that a work party had fewer than the 28 men required. When Boyle correctly pointed out that the guard had miscounted, a heated exchange ensued. Riled, the Korean took out his rifle and started beating Boyle with its butt. By the time Toosey broke up the fight, Boyle had a broken an arm and several fractured ribs.

Toosey took the captain to the camp hospital, then personally stood guard outside for the whole of the following day. The Japanese demanded that the captain return to work, but Toosey responded that Boyle was too ill and that as the injured captain was the only British officer to speak Japanese, there would be no work parties the following day. Work stalled. The Korean guard didn't dare beat Toosey, whom the Japanese had set up as the camp's commander, and so withdrew. Work was suspended for two days while Boyle lay in hospital. Eventually, the Japanese commander punished the Korean guard involved in the fracas and the men returned to work.

In his report after the war, Toosey described his attempts to manage the Japanese:

"Generally speaking, a combination of diplomacy, combined with firmness and good discipline was the most successful, but, in some cases, where one had to handle sadistic semi-civilised and stupid individuals, no methods produced much result."

Picking up the pace

In early 1943, the prisoners felt a growing sense of panic among the Japanese. Allied aircraft had begun to drop mines in the coastal waters around Burma and finishing the railway became more urgent than ever. Originally, the project was scheduled to finish in December, but the deadline was suddenly moved forwards by two months. The change ushered in the so-called "Speedo" period, and the already inhumane working conditions deteriorated further.

In his diary, Coast defined the term:

"Speedo meant 'work very fast, or I'll hit you with a bamboo [stick] or crowbar, whatever is closest'."

The prisoners were already half-dead from hunger, illness and overwork and could not possibly make the new deadline. To pick up the pace, the Japanese brought more labour to the jungle. British and Dutch prisoners of war from across Southeast Asia arrived along with a mass of Indonesian workers, who had been lured there with false promises of good working conditions and high wages.

Coast watched British soldiers arrive from Singapore. They had no idea what awaited them. The Japanese had told them that they were required for administrative duties and would otherwise be free to pass the time as they liked. As a result, they brought plenty of creature comforts with them from their previous prison camps. Coast reported that when the British prisoners of war arrived in Ban Pong, "The Nips there... had the laugh of their lives when they saw the pianos and lighting plant; they thought it all awfully funny."

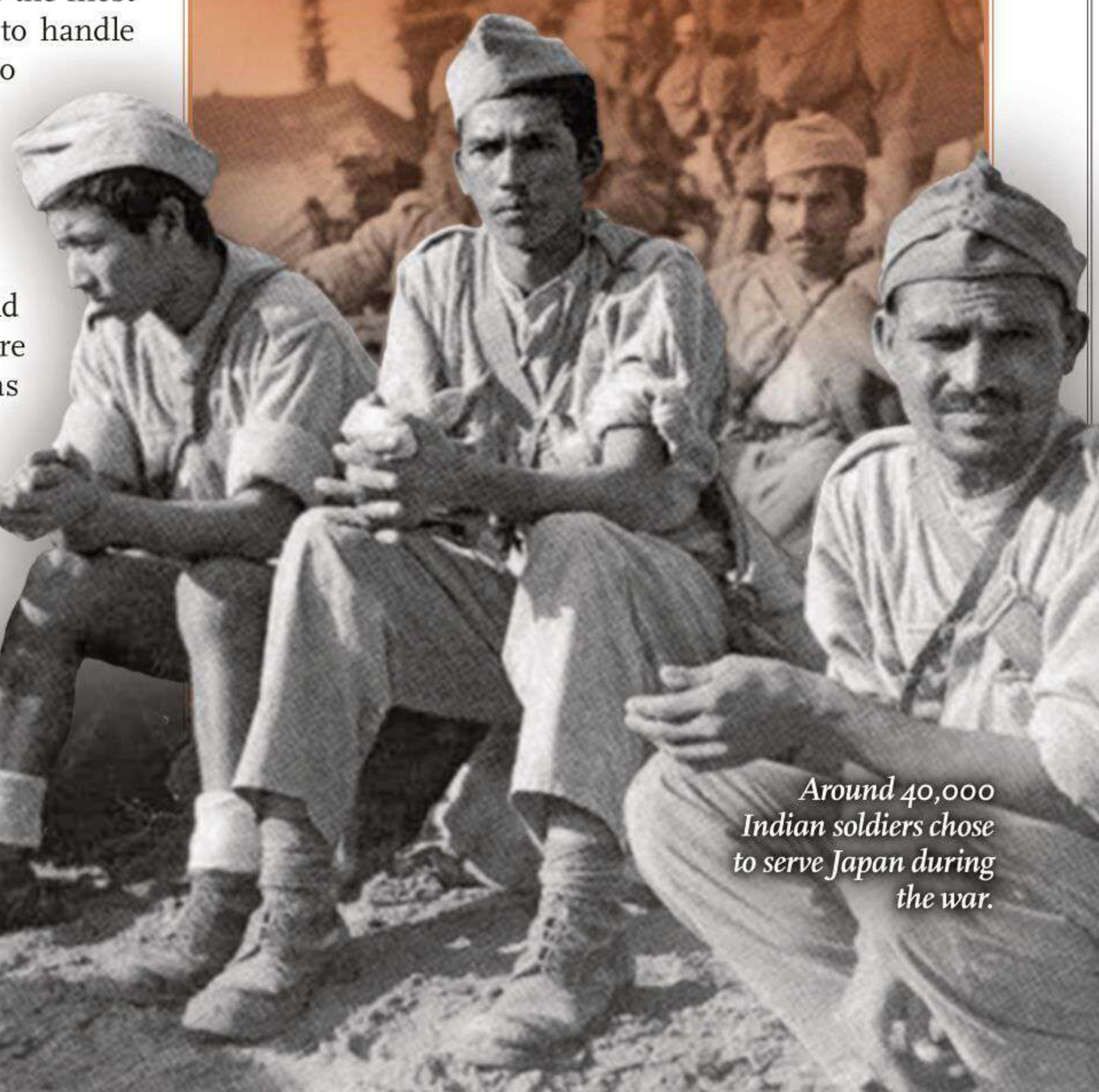
Once the guards recovered, the prisoners were made to discard anything they couldn't carry. The rest of the

Indians given a way out

While most Allied prisoners of war couldn't escape from the camps, the Japanese gave Indian prisoners a way out of their bondage.

In February 1942, the Japanese captured thousands of soldiers when the Singapore garrison surrendered, including 45,000 troops from the British Indian Army. But unlike the British and Australian POWs, the Japanese allowed the Indian prisoners to escape the camp's hellish conditions. In return, however, the soldiers had to switch sides and join the Indian National Army, which fought with the Japanese against British colonial rule.

The plan was that once the Japanese had worked their way across India's borders, the Indian National Army would be sent in behind the British lines as guerrillas. But the Japanese never made it that far, and the Indian National Army was primarily used as a security force.



Around 40,000 Indian soldiers chose to serve Japan during the war.

journey into the jungle would be on foot. But while the prisoners left behind many of their possessions on the station platform, they dropped far more during the first day's march. The pace was relentless and in the tropical heat any excess weight could lead to heatstroke. Among the possessions left were large quantities of clothing. Later, they would rue the loss. The jungle's humidity soon turned their uniforms to rags, and the Japanese provided no new clothes. Coast wrote:

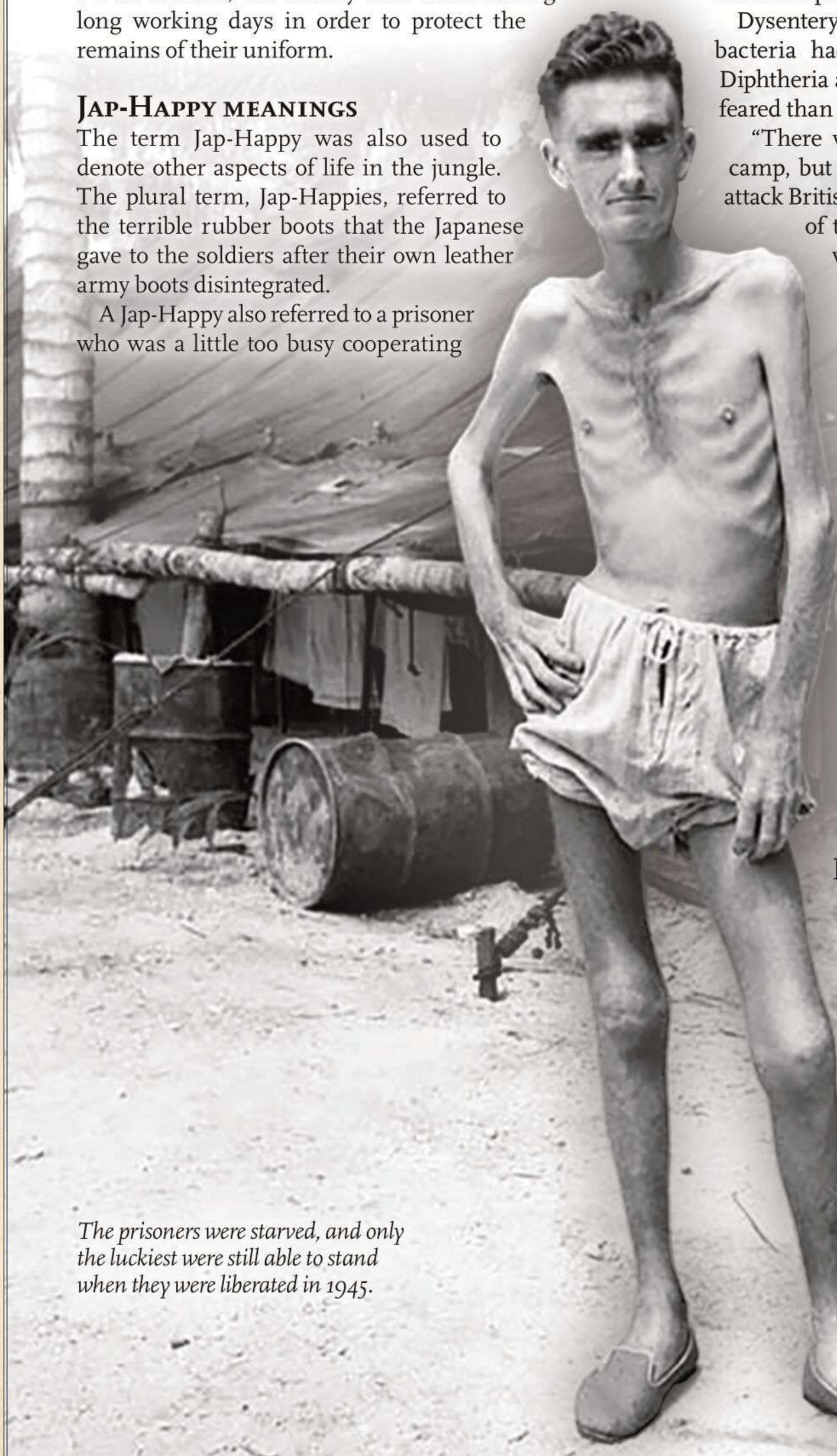
"The total kit of the average troop might be made up as follows: an old hat, a pair of boots with leaky soles and, of course, no socks; a Jap-Happy in which he worked; perhaps a patched pair of reserve shorts – his only 'smart garment' – no other clothes at all."

A Jap-Happy was a loincloth that looked like a nappy. The POWs hated it, but usually wore them during long working days in order to protect the remains of their uniform.

Jap-Happy meanings

The term Jap-Happy was also used to denote other aspects of life in the jungle. The plural term, Jap-Happies, referred to the terrible rubber boots that the Japanese gave to the soldiers after their own leather army boots disintegrated.

A Jap-Happy also referred to a prisoner who was a little too busy cooperating with Japanese soldiers – often to obtain extra food and equipment. The prisoners of war hated the guards, but Toosey understood how to use them. Prisoners with good connections could get hold of vital medicine that could mean the difference between life and death in the camp's overcrowded hospital.



The prisoners were starved, and only the luckiest were still able to stand when they were liberated in 1945.

Disease was the biggest killer

The most common cause of hospitalisation was malaria. The disease could be combated with quinine, which the Japanese had easy access to thanks to the empire's capture of Indonesia, one of the world's largest production sites for the drug, in 1942. But quinine was rarely available in the Thai jungle. According to Coast, this wasn't due to calculated sadism, more complete indifference.

Dysentery with bloody diarrhoea occurred frequently, as bacteria had free reign in the unhygienic conditions. Diphtheria also flourished. However, no disorder was more feared than cholera.

"There were rumours about cases in another British camp, but we did not believe it, because cholera couldn't attack British camps in the year 1943 – cholera was a scourge of the Dark Ages," Coast wrote in his diary. "The very next day we heard that cholera was in our own HQ camp, just three kilometres away, and that two men were already dead from it."

The Japanese tried to quarantine the infected camps, but the disease spread anyway. Coast saw how reasonably healthy prisoners could be infected and die in less than a day, their faces rendered almost unrecognisable by the ravages of the illness.

A heroic effort by British doctors in the camps kept the death toll down. Often, doctors were forced to try risky treatment methods that no one would have dared to attempt in a British hospital during peacetime.

Eventually, the cholera epidemic ebbed away, but the illness had drastically reduced the workforce. The losses were particularly high among the Indonesian workers, who didn't have access to medical care, and received virtually no medicine from the Japanese.

Even the Elephants collapsed

Despite the casualties, the pace had to be maintained and, in the spring of 1943, the Japanese ordered the officers to begin labouring alongside their men. The decision was yet another breach of the Geneva Convention's rules, but the officers had little choice but to acquiesce. The cost of disobeying the Japanese guards was too great.

By then, the officers were stronger than most of the men they commanded and were assigned the more physically demanding jobs as a result.

At times, elephants were used for the most strenuous tasks. But when the animals collapsed through overwork, men had to



POWs always had to wear dog tags showing their rank and service number.

take over. According to the calculations of Japanese engineers, one elephant could be replaced by 14 humans.

Eventually, in October 1943, the work parties from the north and south met at Konkuita. The Japanese celebrated by laying a special section of copper rail that completed the line and attaching it with a golden peg.

The cost of the railway was high. Around 12,000 of the 60,000 Allied prisoners of war who worked on the line died during its construction. Some were shot trying to escape, others starved to death, but the majority succumbed to illness. Overwork and malnutrition destroyed the immune system leaving men vulnerable to infections and parasites.

The death toll was even higher among the 180,000 Indonesian workers, with historians estimating that around half perished. The Japanese also suffered in the inhospitable environment – around eight percent of the guards posted there died. Most were victims of tropical diseases, but some particularly sadistic guards were assassinated and their bodies hidden where no one would ever dare to look – for example, in the camps' stinking latrine pits.

The diary disappeared

Once the railway was complete, conditions for the prisoners of war improved somewhat. Many were relocated to healthier environments and, overall, they were left in relative peace by the guards. The prisoners devised activities to pass the time and even to educate themselves. Many began growing vegetables, put on plays and formed camp universities, where educated men gave lectures on everything from Greek poetry to modern politics.

When the war ended in September 1945, the prisoners of war finally dared to believe that they would survive.

When the news reached Toosey's camp that the US had dropped nuclear bombs on Japan and that the emperor had capitulated, the lieutenant colonel decided to celebrate with a parade. Throughout the war, Toosey had tried to maintain military discipline, so that the men felt part of a community. Now, the skeletal soldiers appeared on parade, wearing the closest they could muster to smart uniforms. Toosey described his feelings:

"The best part of 4,000 men standing in strict lines singing 'God Save the King', the Union Jack going up, and they'd been prisoners for 3½ years. I didn't cry but I felt like it."

Coast also wanted to cry – albeit for another reason. For safety, the lieutenant had buried the tightly written pages of his diary in a box at the foot of a tree. When the Japanese surrendered, he went to retrieve the manuscript, but the box was gone.

On the journey back to Britain, the lieutenant sat in a cabin feverishly rewriting his missing work while everything was still in fresh in his mind. The result was such a well-composed text that the diary was published as early as 1946 – the first of many books to commemorate the men who built the Railroad of Death.

PERSPECTIVE

Railroad of Death ended as a failure

Despite being finished in record time, the railway never played a crucial role. Sections collapsed and air attacks prevented it being used for transport.

The Burma railway was in operation for almost two years, but only 500,000 tonnes of supplies and two divisions were ever transported along it to the front line – a tiny fraction of what the Japanese needed to maintain the army's offensive capability.

In most places, the rails were laid on soil foundations that couldn't take the weight of the heavy train carriages and wagons and quickly washed away in the monsoon rains. From 1944, the route was also subjected to frequent Allied air strikes. The rails were dislodged and precision bombing destroyed the bridges.

The Burma Railway was closed in 1947, but parts of it were reopened in 1957.

415 kilometres. That was the length of the finished railway line.

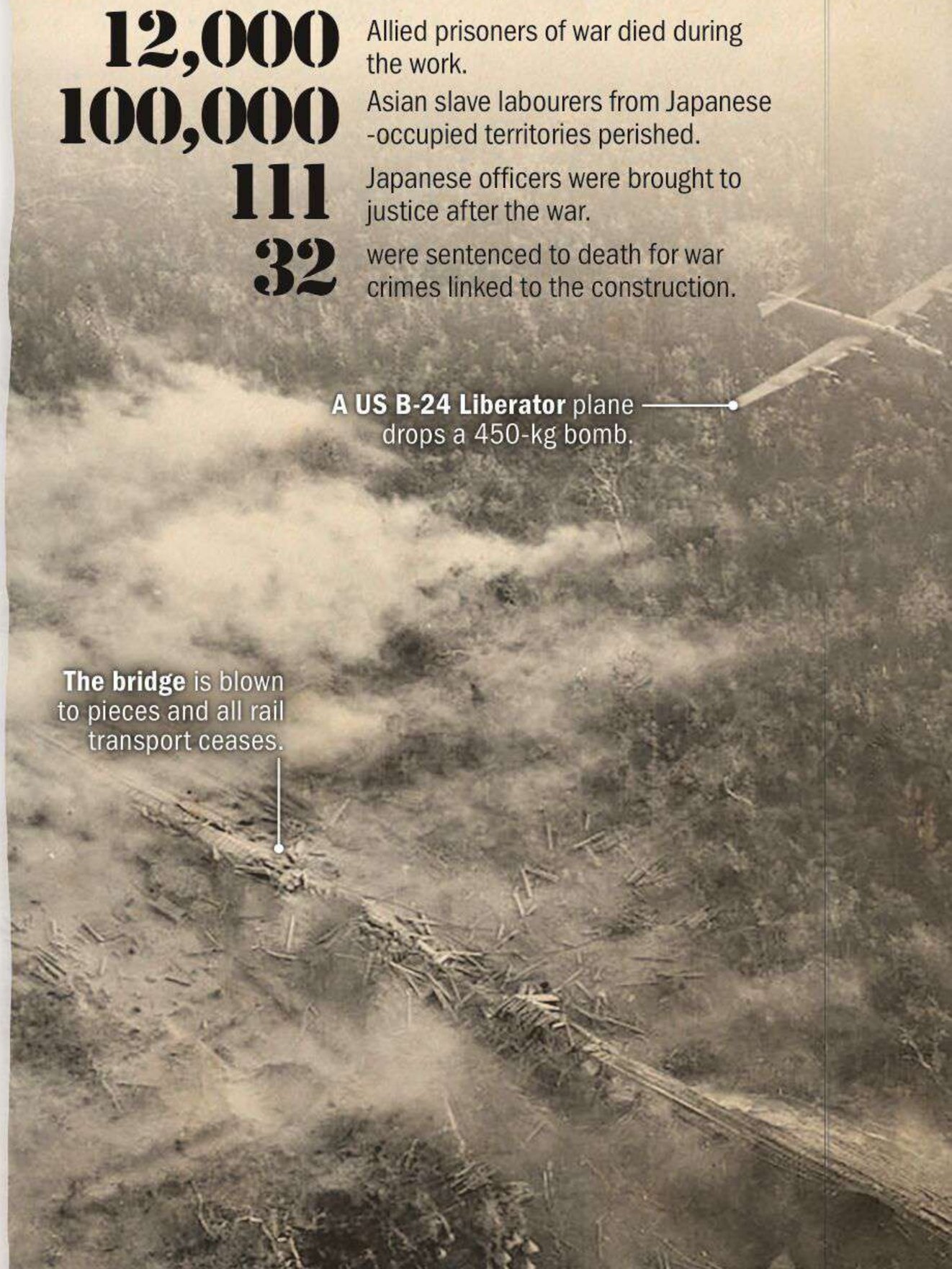
600 bridges had to be built to carry the tracks along the length of the line.

12,000 Allied prisoners of war died during the work.

100,000 Asian slave labourers from Japanese -occupied territories perished.

111 Japanese officers were brought to justice after the war.

32 were sentenced to death for war crimes linked to the construction.





1943

PRISONERS WERE SUBJECTS OF EVIL EXPERIMENTS

Some prisoners at Auschwitz managed to avoid the gas chamber, but surviving was perhaps a worse fate – especially for those chosen as lab rats by a twisted doctor intent on furthering 'science' at any cost.

Some of the Jewish newcomers at Auschwitz were kept alive for work or other reasons, the rest were sent directly to the gas chambers.

Auschwitz, 1943

THE STAGE IS SET



Hundreds of thousands of people have already been killed in Auschwitz when a young doctor with a background in 'race sciences' arrives at the camp in 1943. The man quickly realizes that Auschwitz offers a unique opportunity to test extreme medical theories on live human subjects. The doctor's name is Josef Mengele.

THE MAN IN SS UNIFORM stood in shiny, polished riding boots with his feet slightly apart. One thumb rested in his pistol belt, in the other hand he held a cane. Frightened prisoners were brought forward one at a time, and each time he decided their fate with a flick of the stick: strong and able prisoners to the right; the weak to the left.

The next pair of prisoners stepped forward, clutching one another in fear. The SS officer's cold expression suddenly warmed with a smile. He crouched before the twin girls. With a gentle finger, he stroked one of the sisters on the cheek asking if they would like some cupcakes. The girls nodded warily. The officer clicked his fingers and a guard ushered the twins away from the two lines.

The camp doctor returned to sorting Auschwitz's new arrivals: left, left, right, left... A few hours later, most of the newcomers were dead. The few who had been sent to the right would live a few weeks longer as slave labourers at the camp.

Meanwhile, in the camp's private laboratory, the twin girls had been strapped to operating tables. A medical coat now covered Josef Mengele's SS uniform and the smile was gone. He picked up a scalpel. The experiment was about to begin.

As a child, Josef Mengele dreamed of earning a place in the history books. His upbringing in Bavaria – as the oldest child of wealthy Catholic parents – was marked by competition and the struggle for parental recognition. In his diaries, Mengele described both his father and mother as being emotionally austere, and his relationship with his two brothers was tainted by jealousy. His childhood friend, Julius Diesbach, described him as a fiercely ambitious young man:

"He didn't just want to succeed but to stand out from the crowd. It was his passion for fame. He once told me that one day I would read his name in the encyclopaedia."

Auschwitz was established in 1940 and used mainly for political prisoners. From 1942, the site became an extermination camp. Several sub-camps were built prior to 1944.

TAKING SIDES

Mengele decided that this recognition would come through a fine education and a well-paid job as a doctor. After graduating in 1930, therefore, he decided to study medicine with an emphasis on anthropology and human genetics at the University of Munich.

"My family will be very impressed when I become the first Mengele scientist", Joseph wrote to a friend.

The time spent in Munich was not spent only on studies. In the early 1930s, the city was buzzing with political turmoil. The Nazis were on the rise, and Mengele was intrigued by their ideology.

"It was impossible to stand on the sidelines in these politically stirring times," he later wrote, claiming that it was key that "our Fatherland not succumb to the Marxist-Bolshevik attack".

At university, Mengele was becoming more interested in studying racial development



Around 500,000 first-class Iron Crosses were awarded.

FROM GERMANY TO BRAZIL

MENGELE HAD GREAT AMBITIONS

1911

16TH MARCH
Josef 'Beppo' Mengele is born in Günzburg. His parents, Walburga and Karl, own a successful factory. Along with his younger brothers, Karl and Alois, he is raised in a strict Catholic household.

1931

Mengele joins Stahlhelm, a far-right paramilitary organisation, which dissolved in 1935.

1935

Mengele submits his doctorate thesis on racial characteristics.



Otmar von Verschuer (right) becomes Mengele's mentor and, like him, is intrigued by research on twins.

1937

1ST JANUARY
Mengele becomes a research assistant at the Third Reich Institute for Heredity, Biology and Racial Purity in Frankfurt.

MAY
Mengele joins the Nazi Party. His number is 5,574,974.

1942

JANUARY
As an SS officer, Mengele receives the Iron Cross for bravery after rescuing two soldiers from a burning tank.

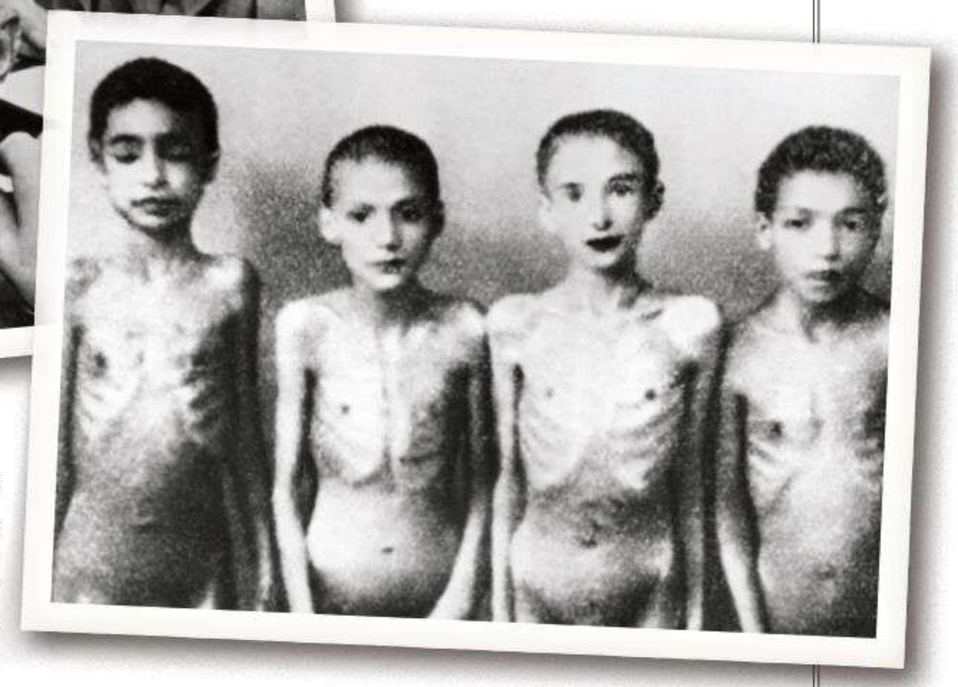
than curing diseases. German medical courses at the time were premised on Social Darwinist theories that justified the notion of racial superiority, and which were used by the Nazis to support their belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race. Mengele unreservedly embraced these theories.

In Munich, he studied under several of Germany's foremost authorities in the field. One of the researchers was Theodor Mollison, who claimed to be able to determine if a person had Jewish ancestry simply by looking at a photograph of them.

In 1935, Mollison made Mengele's long-standing dream of an academic career possible by awarding him a doctorate for his thesis entitled 'Racial Morphological Research on the Lower Jaw Section of Four Racial Groups'.



Nose measurements were believed to show how Aryans differed from Jews.



When the Soviets reached Auschwitz in 1945, they found starving children.

Nazi influences

The doctorate paved the way for a job. In 1937, Mengele was hired in a research post at the Third Reich Institute for Heredity, Biology and Racial Purity at the University of Frankfurt. Here, he learned from one of Germany's leading race theorists, Professor Otmar von Verschuer, who did not hide his political opinions, hailing Adolf Hitler as "the first statesman to recognise hereditary biology and race hygiene".

It was around this time that Mengele applied for membership of the Nazi Party. He joined the SS and, with Verschuer's support, he quickly rose through the ranks of Nazi party academics.

Verschuer spoke of Mengele as a man with "a keen interest in medical research and surgery... [who] was also intelligent and cultured". German historian Andreas Hillgruber described Mengele quite differently: "He was convinced he served a great cause, an attempt by Hitler to prevent mankind self-destructing...Mengele had become the embodiment of Nazism in its most extreme form."



Mengele saw Auschwitz as a gigantic lab, with its inmates as his subjects.

Josef Mengele

Doctor enjoyed playing god

Mengele was transferred to Auschwitz in the summer of 1943. Before that, he had fought on the Eastern Front where he received the Iron Cross for bravery.

As a war hero, Mengele was accorded respect by his new colleagues, but they soon noticed he was different. Mengele was a workaholic, never shirking even the most unpleasant duties, and was always taking on additional projects and responsibilities. Plus, he hardly ever drank alcohol – even when it was his turn to make the selection at the railhead. This was the sorting process that ensued every time a new train arrived crowded with prisoners. Camp doctors had to

1943

MAY

Mengele arrives at Auschwitz as a camp doctor. The ambitious medical man immediately begins to experiment on the camp's prisoners, especially the Jews. Mengele is particularly interested in twins and people with physical disabilities. Hundreds die in his tests.

1945

17TH JANUARY

Mengele flees Auschwitz. For the next three years, he works on a farm under a false name.

1949

JULY

With the help of a Nazi underground network, the doctor flees to Argentina.



Otmar von Verschuer was a leading name in German race research before and during the war. Like Josef Mengele, von Verschuer examined twins to determine how diseases and 'criminal proclivities' emerged and were inherited through generations.

evaluate which prisoners were fit to live and which should be sent to the gas chamber. The task was extremely unpopular: most doctors anaesthetised themselves with morphine, ether and alcohol in order to cope with their roles as lords of life and death. But not Mengele. He often volunteered and eagerly performed the selection, even playing classical music while he sorted out which prisoners would live and which would die. He often darted in among the crowds of prisoners to pick out particular individuals, who were immediately sent to the camp's well-equipped laboratory. Mengele even showed up on his days off to make sure that he didn't miss out on anyone he thought worthy of study. The doctor was still driven by a burning ambition to be recognised.

"I would say he was moderately gifted," one of Mengele's university professors had said, damning him with faint praise. "I saw two of his publications before the war and there was

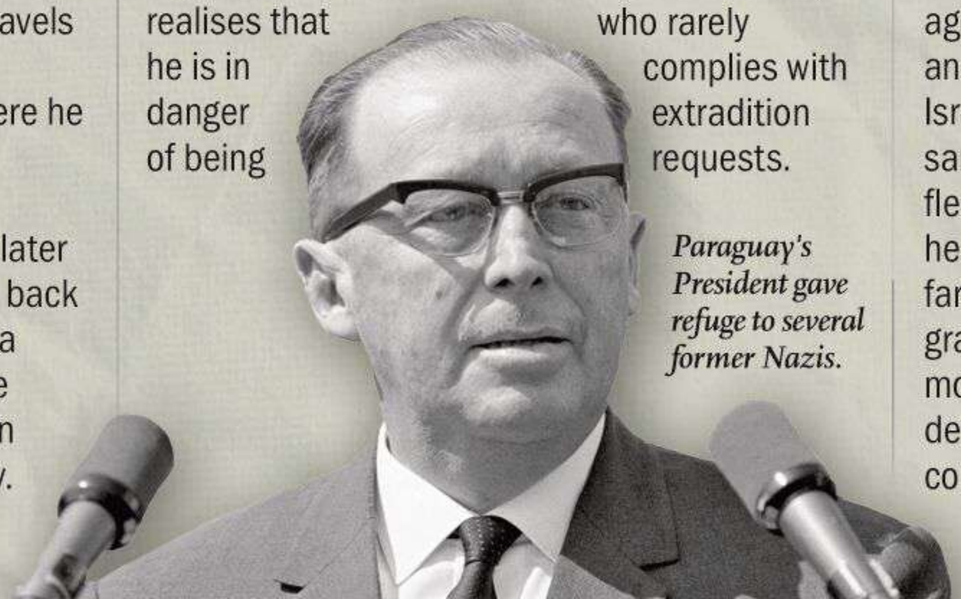
1954

Mengele is divorced from his wife, Irene, who does not go to South America. Two years later, he travels to Germany via Switzerland, where he meets his late brother's wife, Martha. Martha later follows Mengele back to South America with her son. The couple marries in 1958 in Uruguay.

1959

SUMMER

A former prisoner tracks Mengele to Argentina. The doctor realises that he is in danger of being extradited from Argentina to West Germany and moves to Paraguay, which is ruled by dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who rarely complies with extradition requests.



Paraguay's President gave refuge to several former Nazis.

1960

11TH MAY

Top Nazi Adolf Eichmann is kidnapped by Israeli agents in Argentina and brought to trial in Israel. Fearing the same fate, Mengele flees to Brazil where he gets a job on a farm. Mengele is gradually becoming more paranoid and depressed. He contemplates suicide.



In his last days, Josef Mengele lived in a small, dirty shack in Brazil.

1975

Mengele moves into a small shack in a poor suburb of São Paulo, where he sinks into a lonely life. His health is failing and in 1976, he has a stroke.

1979

7TH FEBRUARY

Mengele is visiting friends in the south of São Paulo, where he dies of a heart attack while swimming. In 1985, a skeleton was found, which Brazilian police believed to be Mengele. In 1992, police DNA tests conclusively confirm the body's identity: Auschwitz's Angel of Death is no more.

certainly nothing brilliant about them. I thought he might make a professor in about twenty years." But the medic wasn't prepared to wait that long – he wanted to show his parents and the rest of his family that he could achieve great results now through his experimental work on race.

Mengele spent almost all of his spare time at the concentration camp in his laboratory, examining selected prisoners. Auschwitz turned out to be a land of plenty for the ambitious doctor: here he had unlimited access to research material. Often Mengele sat up until late into the night – busy writing reports or staring into his microscope.

Twins could conquer the world

Mengele usually picked people with physical disabilities and disorders for his tests. His goal was to investigate how such deformities occurred in the hope that they could be purged over time. In his mind, this was necessary to keep the Aryan race pure and strong.

Mengele was at his most animated when the newly arrived boxcars contained twins. The doctor believed that twins held the answer to a new German world order. By studying and experimenting on twins, he hoped to discover a method to induce twin births in German women, thereby rapidly increasing the number of Aryans on the planet.

Mengele was also fascinated by the fact that one twin could be strong and well-proportioned, while the other was weak and deformed. He tried to find out why by swapping the siblings' blood, both with their own twin and those from other families. At other times, Mengele went even further, as former-prisoner Vera Alexander testified:

"SS men came and took two children away... One of them was hunchback. Two or three days later, an SS man brought them back in a terrible state. They had been cut. The hunchback was sewn to the other child, back to back, their wrists back to back, too. There was a terrible smell of gangrene."

Mengele also believed that blue eyes could be artificially induced. He performed numerous experiments to change the pigmentation of his victims' irises. Once, he sent for 36 children from one of the barracks. The children had coloured dye injected into their brown eyes. The result was painful infections with many losing their sight. The experiment was a failure, so Mengele ordered the children gassed.

The Jewish doctor, Vexler Jancu, recalled seeing the result of the experiment:

"In June 1943 I went to the Gypsy camp in Birkenau. I saw a wooden table. On it were samples of eyes. They each had a number and a letter. The eyes were very pale yellow to bright blue, green and violet."

The prisoner Vera Kriegel had a similar experience when one day she found an entire wall covered in eyes in Mengele's private laboratory. "They were pinned up like butterflies... I thought I was dead and already living in hell."

Bones were cooked clean

No one tried to stop the experiments. On the contrary, several medical authorities encouraged him as long as the tests furthered Nazi racial doctrine. Mengele, for his part, was happy to give long lectures about his intentions and achievements to colleagues at Auschwitz.

One day, Mengele found a father and son among the prisoners. The father had a pronounced curvature of the spine, while his son had a deformed foot. Mengele felt compelled to examine these 'specimens' to see if they shared any other abnormalities. He had the pair shot, then boiled so that their flesh could be stripped from their bones. The skeletons were then put in a bath of petroleum so that the bones became white and odourless.

Once the work was complete, Mengele led the SS officers around the skeletons, while he pompously pointed out the deformities and explained the significance of his 'scientific' investigations.

The prisoner Alex Dekel, a Romanian Jew, witnessed Mengele operating on patients without anaesthesia. In one such case, he cut away sections of a patient's stomach and on another, he removed a patient's heart while he was still alive, but the doctor was never called to account:

"Mengele ran a butcher shop... nobody ever questioned him – why did this one die? Why did that one perish? The patients did not count. He professed to do what he did in the name of science, but it was a madness."

Mengele always tried to maintain a cool, demeanour – he wanted to give the impression of being a scientist, not a torturer. He was always immaculately dressed and remained

For 34 years
Josef Mengele lived under various aliases, such as Fritz Ullman, Dr Fausto Rindón, Gregor Helmut and S Josi Alvers Aspiazu. The Nazi doctor was never caught.

1896-1969

NAME **OTMAR VON VERSCHUER**

TITLE BIOLOGIST AND GENETICIST

Race theorist avoided punishment

Although Otmar von Verschuer probably knew about and welcomed Josef Mengele's macabre experiments at Auschwitz, the biologist managed to avoid punishment after the war. Von Verschuer was indicted, but the evidence was destroyed – possibly by himself.

Von Verschuer succeeded in being rehabilitated and became chairman of the German Anthropological Association in 1952.

- **Was a professor in Frankfurt.**
- **Died in a car accident.**





Female camp guards like Irma Grese assisted Josef Mengele in Auschwitz.



Mengele mixed with other physicians and officers at Auschwitz but usually remained detached at parties. He liked to give the impression of being a hard-working scientist who refrained from excess and alcohol.



Mengele travelled to South America in 1949 with papers in the name of Helmut Gregor.

detached at social events. But sometimes the mask slipped. Camp physician Gisella Perl witnessed Mengele's explosive temper when he was faced with a female prisoner who had escaped the gas chamber six times:

"He grabbed her by the neck and proceeded to beat her head to a bloody pulp... screaming at her... 'You want to escape, don't you? You can't escape now... You are going to burn like the others... you dirty Jew!'... I saw her two beautiful, intelligent eyes disappear under a layer of blood. Her ears weren't there any longer... her straight, pointed nose was a flat, broken, bleeding mass."

Mengele's sadism wasn't confined to his laboratory, nor his brutality to moments of anger. Annani Silovich Pet'ko, a Russian prisoner, described how one day a large pit filled with flaming gasoline was prepared at the camp. According to her account, shortly afterwards, around ten dumper lorries arrived carrying around 300 children. They were escorted by SS officers; Mengele was with them. One by one, the lorries backed up to the pit and tipped the children into the flames.

"The children started to scream; some of them managed to crawl out of the burning pit; an officer walked around it with sticks and pushed back those who managed to get out. Höss [commandant of Auschwitz] and Mengele were present and were giving orders."

1.1 million
people are believed to have died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. When the Soviets arrived in January 1945, the soldiers found only a few thousand survivors.

Experiments continued to the last

By Autumn 1944, everyone knew that Germany was losing the war. Mengele became increasingly depressed. He paced around his office with his face buried in his hands. But the experiments continued to the last. In December 1944, Mengele performed a series of experiments on 16 women with dwarfism. Only five survived.

Day by day, the Red Army moved closer and Mengele realised that he had to leave. He was last seen by prisoner Martina Puzyna, who later revealed all the details of the experiments carried out on twins. On 17th January 1945, Mengele entered her office.

"He took all my papers, put them into two boxes, and had them taken outside to a waiting car", Puzyna recalled. The doctor never spoke a word.

Auschwitz's Angel of Death was finally gone, but he had made sure that his name would live on in the history books.

Holocaust deniers' lies

The mass murder of Jews and Josef Mengele's evil experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz are still frequently denied by neo-Nazis and other anti-Semites. However, their oft-repeated arguments are easily refuted with documentation and scientific fact.

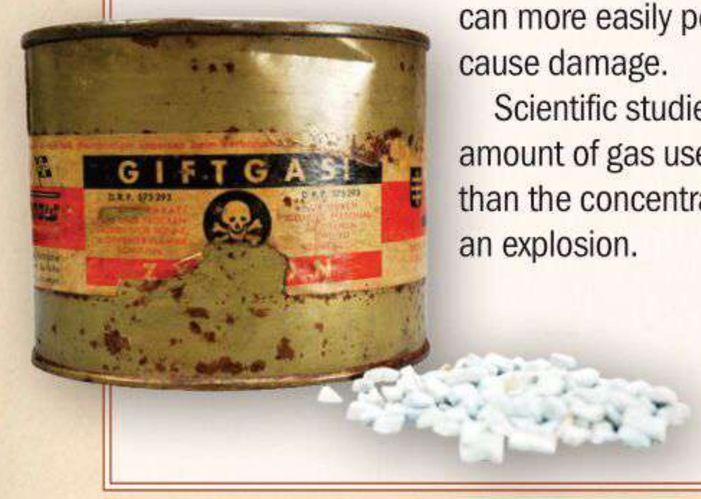
The gas was ineffective

CLAIM: Zyklon B is a pesticide that is not suitable for killing humans. In addition, the use of this gas in combination with heat from the crematorium furnaces would have caused explosions.

FACT

The eerie truth is that Zyklon B is actually more effective on humans than on pests. Humans are warm-blooded as opposed to insects, which is why the toxins in the gas can more easily penetrate human bodies and cause damage.

Scientific studies also show that the amount of gas used was 200 times lower than the concentration levels needed to cause an explosion.



Zyklon B was used for pest control in the concentration camps and was easy to obtain.

The death toll at the concentration camps was greatly exaggerated

CLAIM: The number of Jews killed in the Holocaust can be no more than 200,000-300,000. The concentration camps did not have the capacity to kill more than that, and most prisoners died of natural causes.

FACT

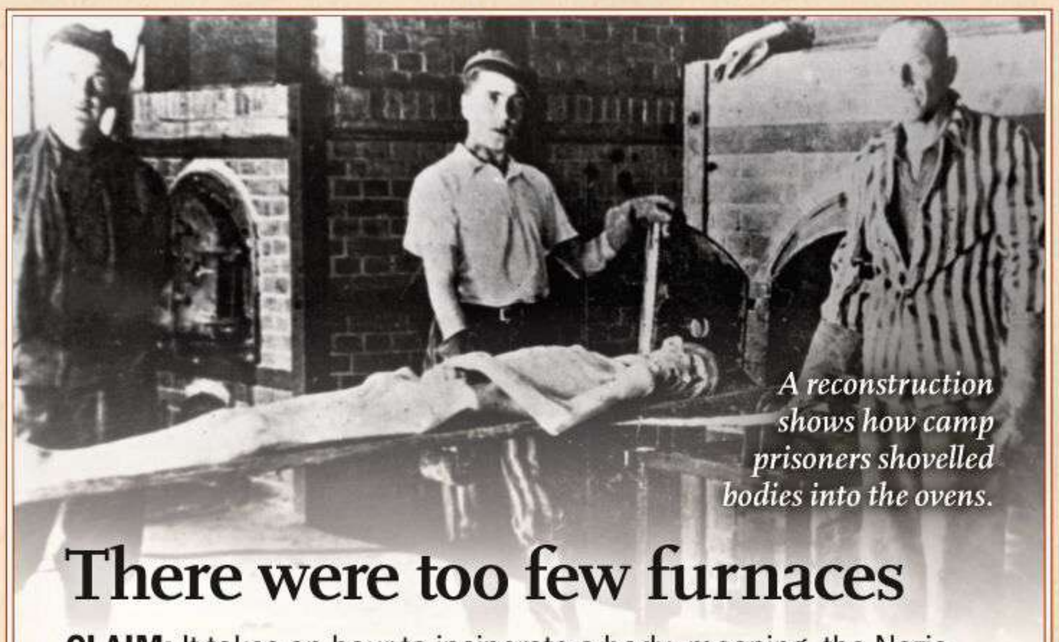
Comparisons of censuses before and after the war prove that around six million Jews disappeared during the Holocaust. There were approximately 3,250,000 Jews living in Poland alone in the 1930s and only 350,000 after the war. The genocide has also been confirmed by many eyewitnesses. The number of belongings – including clothing, jewellery, suitcases, glasses and gold teeth and fillings – taken from those people provides further evidence of the genocide.

No proof of experiments

CLAIM: Josef Mengele's medical experiments never took place. No photos of the experiments exist and it would irrational for the Nazis to allow doctors to spend time examining 'inferior races'.

FACT

Several eyewitnesses confirm that Mengele and other doctors conducted experiments on live prisoners. Furthermore, some photographic evidence of the experiments has been found.



A reconstruction shows how camp prisoners shovelled bodies into the ovens.

There were too few furnaces

CLAIM: It takes an hour to incinerate a body, meaning the Nazis could not have burned 1.1 million people at Auschwitz.

FACT

The Holocaust deniers' calculation refers to ordinary crematoria, where the furnaces are shut down after each burn so that the ashes can be recovered. But the Nazis used industrial firing. Also, workers at Auschwitz were ordered to crush the torsos of the corpses with iron bars to reduce the cremation time.



Photographic evidence that shows the crematoria at Auschwitz

1944

30TH MARCH

BOMBERS LEFT GERMAN CITIES IN RUINS

Relentless waves of Allied bombers delivered deadly payloads across the Third Reich all day, everyday. Despite the best efforts of desperate German anti-aircraft gun crews and fighter pilots, the attackers never faltered and the hundreds of thousands of shells they dropped flattened German cities and terrorised ordinary civilians.

The first terror bombing campaigns against German civilians began in 1942, and left a trail of devastation and loss in their wake.

Germany, 1944

THE STAGE IS SET



German civilians haven't been greatly affected by the war so far. Allied air strikes against Nazis' military industries have inflicted only minor damage. But now the British and Americans have switched tactics: huge waves of aircraft are carpet-bombing residential areas in an attempt to force Hitler to surrender.



The Bomber Command insignia indicated if the wearer was a gunner (AG) or navigator (N).

Wing commander Francis William Thompson peered through the small square windshields of his Lancaster bomber with concern. Cloud cover over the horizon was decreasing and the British pilot was aware that his bomber – 44 Squadron's 'Z-Zebra' – would be clearly visible against the night sky. The weather forecast that had been delivered at that afternoon's briefing on 30th March 1944 had been wrong. The Lancaster was flying across the moonlit European continent with hundreds of other British bombers in clear view, with German night fighters and anti-aircraft guns lying in wait.

"Navigator to Skipper," called navigator Tony Stancer from the nose of the plane. "The Met forecast winds are all bull. Heavy tail winds have given us an incredible groundspeed."

More unwelcome news. Thompson would have to slow the 30-tonne plane's progress by altering course to perform a series of 'dog-leg' manoeuvres on its way towards that night's target of Nuremberg. It was crucial that each wave of bombers arrived at the industrial city in southern Germany at the specified time. Just as the pilot swung his 21-metre-long plane for the first dog-leg turn, he heard the radio chirp again:

"Unidentified aircraft coming towards us: port quarter", warned Flight Sergeant Tommy Hall from Z-Zebra's rear.

Thompson was forced to throw the plane into a dive as the giant shadow of a Halifax bomber appeared above the cockpit window, a mere eight metres – 25 feet – from the Lancaster. "Jeeze, that was close!" someone buzzed over the radio. All seven crew members in Z-Zebra were left in no doubt that the wind speed was causing chaos as planes struggled to keep to their agreed course and speed.

On the other hand, however, the crew encountered no enemy fighters as Z-Zebra left the English Channel behind and flew across the Belgian coast. The men hoped the raid's first wave of Mosquito bombers had been successful with a planned diversionary move – attacking targets some way from the Nuremberg route to lure German fighters away from the actual target.

Their hopes were dashed as Z-Zebra approached Frankfurt – it was clear the enemy had no intention of letting the 800-odd British aircraft fly freely through German airspace. Hall, manning the rear-gunner position, suddenly spotted an enemy fighter through the rear windows and screamed to Thompson to dive. The Lancaster swung right and turned its nose to the ground. The enemy followed the move, but when Thompson performed another evasive manoeuvre, he lost the German pilot, leaving him to chase another bomber crew.

For the second time, the Z-Zebra crew had barely escaped death – and the British hadn't even reached their target in Nuremberg, where anti-aircraft artillery would subject the plane to



The victims of the raid on Dresden on 13th-14th February 1945 were placed in large piles in the city square and burned.

massive shelling. Despite the huge costs of the air attacks, however, the Allies had no intention of halting their campaign of terror bombing.

British set Germany on fire

Dangerous bombing raids over Germany – like the one carried out by Z-Zebra's crew – were nothing new for the RAF's Bomber Command, which was in control of all British bombers during the war and coordinated most of the Allies' strategic bombing campaigns.

Its first crews had arrived in darkness over Berlin to drop 81 bombs on the capital's airport as early as August 1940, but the 50,000 or so bombers that flew raids over Germany during the war's first two years did little damage to the Nazi war machine. The British had been forced to rethink their approach, abandoning small specific targets like railways and military installations in favour of a more indiscriminate approach – carpet-bombing civilian areas in major cities.

"The primary object of your operations should now be focussed on the morale of the enemy civilian population and, in particular, of the industrial workers", stated an internal document from the Air Ministry, which landed on Bomber Command's staff room table in February 1942.



Tracer fire helped anti-aircraft gunners determine if their targeting was correct.

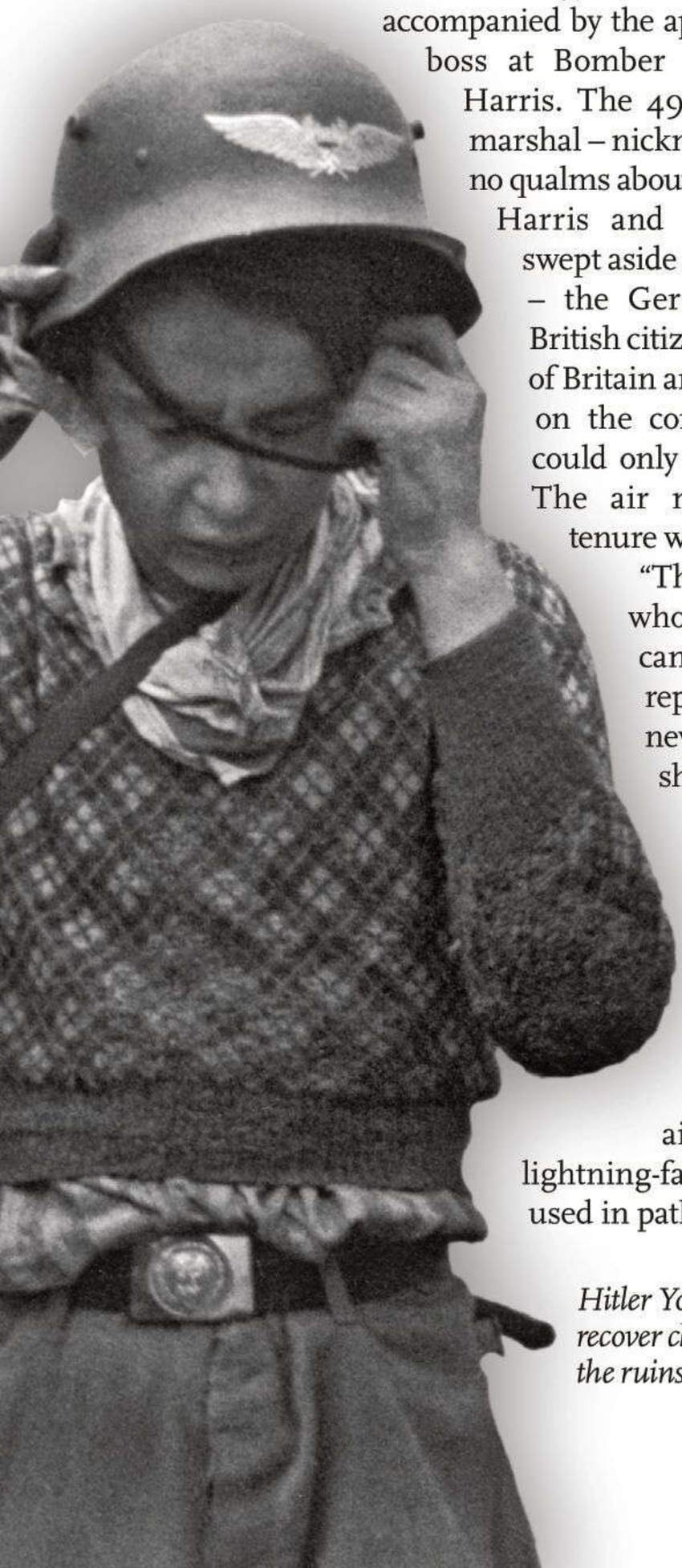


Bombers were met with fire from flak guns with a calibre of up to 128 millimetres.

This new strategy – 'area bombing' – was accompanied by the appointment of a new boss at Bomber Command: Arthur Harris. The 49-year-old British air marshal – nicknamed Bomber – had no qualms about the new target. Both Harris and Winston Churchill swept aside any moral objections – the Germans had bombed British citizens during the Battle of Britain and without a foothold on the continent, the British could only attack from the air. The air marshal began his tenure with a bold remark:

"There are a lot of people who say that bombing cannot win the war. My reply to that is that it has never been tried yet. We shall see."

Lancaster and Halifax heavy bombers were equipped with four engines to allow them to fly far and carry huge loads while new aircraft, such as the lightning-fast Mosquitoes, were used in pathfinder squadrons to mark each objective with target flares to give the heavy bombers something to aim at. The Mosquitoes also dropped thousands of metal foil strips to confuse the enemy. These strips blindsided German radar, thereby depriving Nazi fighter pilots and anti-aircraft batteries of precise targets.



Hitler Youth boys helped to recover charred bodies from the ruins.

But even though British methods had been refined, engines tuned and attack numbers increased, the Germans showed no signs of surrendering in the summer of 1943, by which point Harris had been bombing German cities for over a year. And that was with help from the US Air Force, which had linked up with the RAF in 1942.

In July 1943, Bomber Command finally made its brutal breakthrough when Harris sent more than 3,000 planes to Hamburg in the space of a week as part of Operation Gomorrah. The Germans were to be served notice of how the enemy's bombing could turn a peaceful summer's night into a hellish inferno.

Firestorm engulfed Hamburg's citizens

The clock in Hamburg's bell tower was about to strike 01.00 on 25th July 1943 when an wave of British bombers caught the Northern German city's inhabitants unawares. Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg had just reached the safety of a bunker when the first bombs began tearing houses to pieces and igniting anything combustible. The 64-year-old professor's wife had spent many hours in the bunker during numerous attacks over the past year, but the bombing of 25th July was unusually frightening: "The house shakes, the windows tremble and it is completely different from any of the other times", she noted.

The tonnes of incendiary firebombs were particularly devastating: fires raged in the city's narrow alleys, sucking all air towards the flames. "Children were torn away from their parents' hands by the force of the hurricane and whirled into the fire", a local police report stated.

The violent firestorm sucked all the oxygen from the air, and the city's residents were forced to leave their shelters where the lack of air was particularly acute. Above, on the cobblestones and scorching asphalt roads, however, citizens were left gasping for breath. Many eventually collapsed, but an even more painful death awaited those who survived, : "People who

Several thousand lost their lives in a single day

The Allied air bombings of Nazi countries killed more than 600,000 civilians during the war. More than a thousand residents died in just one day during super concentrated raids on major German cities.



TARGET OF RAID	DATE	ATTACKING NATION	SIZE OF FORCE	GERMAN LOSSES
• **LÜBECK** *Around 170,000 inhabitants*	28th-29th March 1942		• 234 bombers	Between 300 and 1,000 dead
• **COLOGNE** *Around 648,000 inhabitants*	30th-31st May 1942		• 1,046 bombers	469 dead
• **HAMBURG** *Around 1,700,000 inhabitants (as of December 1940)*	25th July-3rd August 1943		• 3,000 bombers	42,600 dead
• **KASSEL** *Around 225,000 inhabitants*	22nd-23rd October 1943		• 569 bombers	At least 10,000 dead
• **DARMSTADT** *Population: unknown*	11th-12th September 1944		• 240 bombers	12,300 dead
• **BERLIN** *Around 4,300,000 inhabitants (as of May 1939)*	3rd February 1945		• Almost 1,000 bombers escorted by 575 fighters	Around 2,894 dead
• **DRESDEN** *About 566,000 inhabitants (as of December 1944)*	13th-14th February 1945		• 1,300 bombers	25,000 dead
• **PFORZHEIM** *Around 79,000 inhabitants (as of May 1939)*	23rd February 1945		• 379 bombers	17,600 dead

Large cities throughout the Third Reich were targeted by Allied bombers.



Equipped with eight machine guns, the crew of a Lancaster could effectively defend themselves against German fighters.

NOTES

The first major RAF bombardment of a German city. 1,468 buildings were levelled while 2,180 others were seriously damaged.

By deploying over a thousand planes in a single raid, the RAF demonstrated that the British could send a greater force against Germany than the Luftwaffe could deliver in return.

Up to one million inhabitants fled Hamburg.

City burned for seven days after the attack.

The raid's target was the city's medieval quarter because the old wooden structures would quickly ignite and create fire storms.

This raid was the Allies' single largest attack on Berlin. The destruction left 120,000 Berliners homeless.

Nearly 4,000 tonnes of bombs and fire bombs were dropped during the raid.

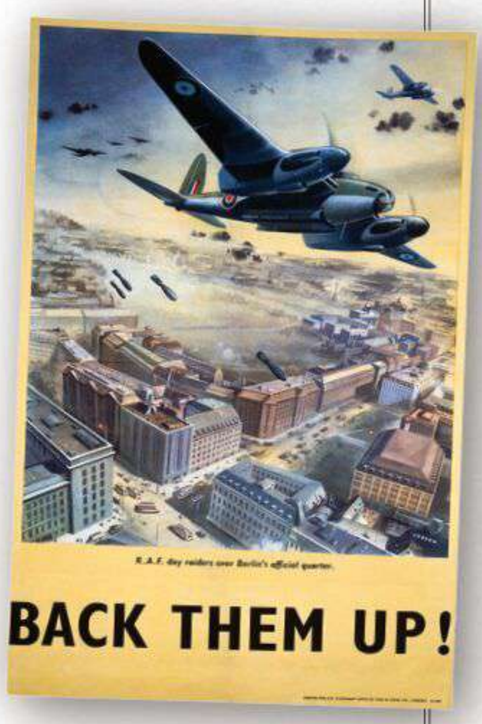
The whole city was set alight in just 22 minutes.

had fled from collapsing bunkers and had got stuck in large crowds in the streets, had burning phosphorus poured over them... [They] rushed into the next air-raid shelter and were shot in order not to spread the flames. In the midst of the fire and the attempts to quench it, women had their babies in the streets", Wolff-Mönckeberg recounted.

She continued her account the following morning, noting the lack of daylight: "The town is so shrouded in smoke. The sun cannot fight its way through, but looks like a bloodshot eye onto the devastation". Day felt like night for the next three days as the sun's rays failed to pierce the smoke. The British and US continued the terror bombing for a week, and every day the number of charred corpses in Hamburg's streets rose.

The Allies finally ended their raid on 3rd August. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels had to concede that "a city of a million inhabitants has been destroyed in a manner unparalleled in history. We are faced with problems that are almost impossible of solution". Armaments Minister Albert Speer was concerned that similar attacks against six other cities would "bring Germany's armaments production to a total halt".

Meanwhile, Hamburg's surviving citizens rolled up their sleeves and began to recover the dead from cellars and the rubble and collected the thousands of bodies lying on the still-hot asphalt.



Slogans on posters urged support for Bomber Command's attacks on German cities.

Life expectancy was six weeks

A total of 42,600 Germans died during the attack on Hamburg in July 1943, and almost as many were injured. At the same time, large parts of the city were completely devastated, and the operation was deemed a triumph in those British circles who'd not witnessed the horrors in the Hanseatic city. Few were as excited as Bomber Harris, who by the end of the year had proclaimed in a letter to the Air Ministry that his bombers "should be sufficient... to produce in Germany by 1st April 1944 a state of devastation in which surrender is inevitable".

The first months of 1944, however, clearly demonstrated Harris had been overly optimistic. In January, Bomber Command lost 2,256 crew members – a further 1,529 were lost in February, and 1,880 in March. No military role on the Allied side was more dangerous than that of a Bomber Command crew member, and for 20-year-old Dick Starkey, who became a pilot in Bomber Command in 1944, the first thing he heard at the air base was far from uplifting:

"Your life expectancy is six weeks. Feel free to unpack!"

Up to half of the crews in Bomber Command perished. When the men returned to barracks after their afternoon briefing, time dragged. The periods between raids were disquieting.

"We'd lie on our beds and not a word would be spoken. When the time came, we were like men going to the gallows", Starkey recounted. Like everyone else, the pilot feared that evening's

Hamburg was left in ruins after air raids in July-August 1943 killed over 42,000 people.



Heavy German flak tore through Allied bombers and sent them crashing to the ground.

encounter with anti-aircraft guns and night fighters: it was like entering a battle arena. The same sentiment was felt by Squadron Leader Thompson and the rest of Z-Zebra's crew when the British flew to Nuremberg early in the morning of 31st March. The sky around the Lancaster was lit by a combination of spotlights and burning bombers that had been hit by flak and enemy fighters.

"Some blew up so close to us that the whole of our aircraft shuddered alarmingly, as if every rivet would pop out of its socket", recalled Z-Zebra's flight-engineer, Flight Lieutenant Steve Burrows.

The large bombers could glide for three or four minutes in the air while the hull was in flames, and these fireballs in the sky helped light up the other RAF aircraft. Nevertheless, Z-Zebra managed to pass unscathed through the German defences. Over Nuremberg bomb aimer Flying Officer Bill Clegg spotted the red target flares the lead bomber had dropped. After two failed attempts to line up properly, an ice-cool Clegg finally opened the bay doors, activated the trigger mechanism and dropped his bomb load over the burning city. The crew exhaled in relief and headed home where Z-Zebra landed later that morning after almost eight exhausting and potentially deadly hours in the air.

Although many bombs had hit Nuremberg during the attack, the men thought the price had been unusually high. Burrows' suspicions were confirmed when he and his crewmates arrived at the mess: "We noticed at breakfast that many seats were empty. There were plenty of fried eggs to spare. They had been cooked for crews who never returned. That evening we consumed gallons of ale."

German morale fell in war's last year

The Nuremberg raid of 31st March 1944 became Bomber Command's blackest day of the war. The attack clearly demonstrated the extreme cost of bombing the enemy's heartlands. No fewer than 95 out of 795 aircraft had been downed, and 545 Bomber Command crew lost their lives.

During the summer, however, things improved for the flight crews, who benefited from the Allied landing in Normandy. The invasion took out many German coastal radar positions, which hampered the Germans' ability to detect the bombers in time. Harris's raids became increasingly successful, and the daily bombardments gradually sucked the spirit and energy out of the German people:

"Having to sit up every night, sometimes for hours, is becoming exhausting... I find the harassed faces of the people more depressing even than the desolate aspect of the town. It must be this constant insomnia that never gives one time to recuperate, be it only a little", wrote one Berlin woman.

"*Das Bunkerleben*" – bunker life – became a a



Crew members on the bombers wore gloves to protect against the cold at high altitude.

FACTS

HUGE LOSSES FOR BRITISH

Bomber Command had 125,000 crew members, but suffered massive losses:

- 55,573 were killed.
- 8,403 were injured.
- 9,868 were taken prisoner.

The Nazis proudly displayed crashed Allied bombers to the public.

BOMBERS

Bombers were built from wooden kits

The Mosquito was basically a large-scale model aircraft. Two symmetrical halves of balsa wood and fabric were glued and screwed together before being joined to the wings. The plane was light and very fast.

Mosquito

The wings were made of plywood, stiffened by a series of transverse ribs. Each wing was built as one piece before it was attached to the plane's body.

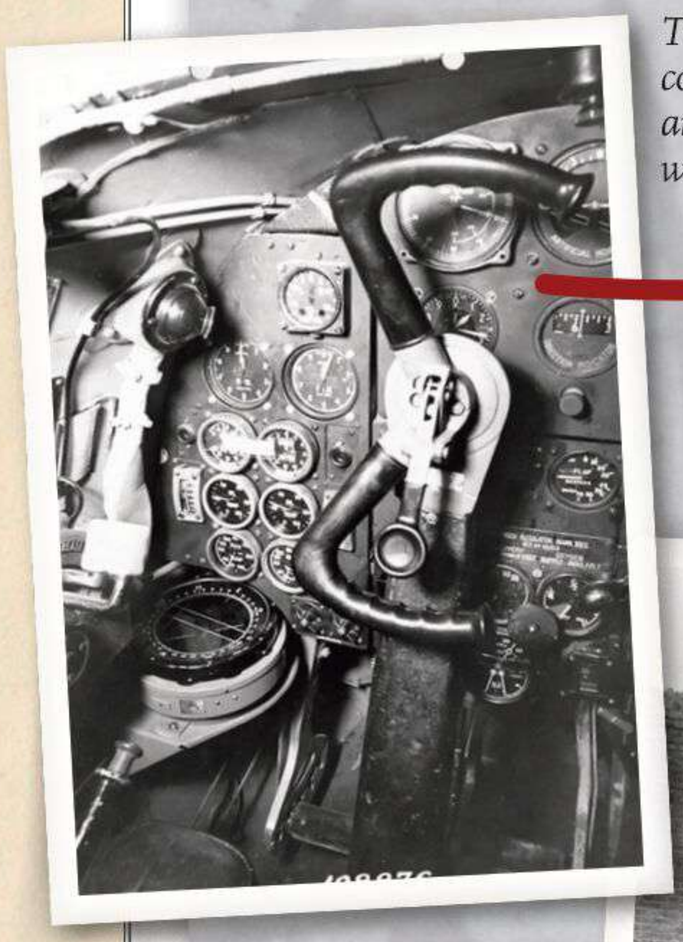
12-cylinder engines from Rolls-Royce. The Merlin Mk 23 yielded 1,390 hp and had propeller blades whose angle could be adjusted in relation to the wind direction to optimise performance.

The aileron was one of the few parts made from aluminium.

The radio antenna was used for navigation and communication.

The cockpit had room for two people: a pilot and a navigator who also triggered the bombs. The cockpit glass was also bullet proof.

The bomb aimer was placed in a glass dome in the plane's nose.



The Mosquito's cockpit was cramped and tightly packed with instruments.

The shock absorbers were simple but effective. They consisted primarily of a large lump of rubber.

The landing gear sat right behind the engines. They could be raised and lowered by hydraulics. The wheels were fitted with a double-braking system.



Mosquitos also helped POWs escape by precision-bombing prison camps.

FACTS

PRODUCTION

■ During World War II, de Havilland factories built around 6,700 Mosquito aircraft, most of which were designed as bombers.

The plane's tail was made of wood, but the surface was reinforced with aluminium and covered with fabric.

The hull was covered with stretched cotton fabric coated with 'aircraft dope' (a plasticised lacquer). This gave the plane a slippery surface, which increased its speed.

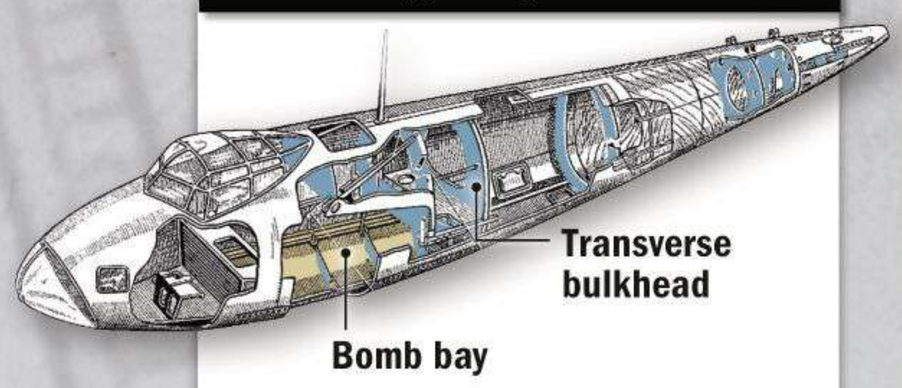
Pressurised bottles safeguarded the crew's supply of oxygen.

Two oil tanks, each with space for about 68 litres of oil, were located near the engines.

The tailwheel could be retracted.



Passenger plane



Passengers could hide in cargo spaces

The plane's body was reinforced by seven transverse wooden bulkheads. It could – in emergencies – hold a single passenger, who bent down and wore an oxygen mask while being transported in the bomb bay.

Mosquito

Wingspan	16.5 metres
Wing area	33.5 m²
Length	12.5 metres
Maximum speed	610 km/h *(at a height of 4,000 metres)*
Minimum speed	190 km/h *(without risk of stall)*
Speed at landing	225 km/h
Weight (no load)	5.9 tonnes
Maximum starting weight	10.1 tonnes
Crew	2 men
Maximum altitude	7,925 metres
Bomb load	907 kg
Armaments	4x machine guns *(7.7 mm)* 4x guns *(20 mm)*

way of life among Germans in 1944-45, with the townsfolk spending a large part of their days in concrete basements. Life in the bunkers exacted a mental toll as well as a physical one, as witnessed by Käthe Breuer whose a neighbour refused to go into the shelter.

"My husband went into their apartment and saw that the neighbour had shot himself through the temple... He simply couldn't take any more."

The many hours people spent underground started to affect industrial production. German workers arrived tired at their assembly lines, and during the day the equipment stopped when the sirens sounded and people had to hurry to the nearest bunker. Daytime attacks, where the Allies specifically targeted factories, gradually became particularly feared.

Armaments Minister Speer tried to split the factories into smaller units and camouflage the buildings so the production facilities weren't visible to enemy aircraft. This measure affected efficiency, however, and massive bombing raids on 60 of the Reich's largest towns and cities in January 1945 proved critical. Speer's estimated tank production had fallen by 35 percent over the previous year, while aircraft production had dropped 31 percent. According to Speer, the enemy's increasingly successful bombing resulted in the "end of German armaments production".



Hitler Youth helped tackle the major fires after air strikes in many cities.



Residents searched for property in destroyed buildings.

Churchill reconsidered terror strategy

Bomber Command and the USAF continued their raids on German cities until the end of the war, but Bomber Harris eventually ran out of major targets after leaving several of Germany's largest cities in ruins. Smaller and insignificant cities found their way on to Harris's list, but the terror bombings became too much for Churchill, who wanted to rethink the strategy. In a memorandum, the Prime Minister described the bombing campaign as "mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive".

Harris joined forces with other senior staff to persuade Churchill to withdraw his objection, and the bombings continued until Germany's surrender. Churchill didn't mention Bomber Command in his victory speech on VE Day, however, and Harris' men – unlike many other soldiers – received no medals for their efforts, which had taken the lives of 55,573 crew members from a total force of around 125,000.

The attacks also proved extremely costly for the Germans. At least 600,000 civilians were killed, more wounded and nearly eight million were made homeless. Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg survived the bombing and at the end of the war could walk Hamburg's streets without the constant fear of wailing sirens and falling bombs. But her homeland had been changed – in a letter to her children, Wolff-Mönckeberg concluded: "Our beautiful and proud Germany has been crushed".



1892-1984

NAME **SIR ARTHUR TRAVERS HARRIS**

TITLE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF BOMBER COMMAND

Bomb chief had no regrets

Arthur 'Bomber' Harris was a veteran of both World War I and the Middle Eastern theatre of WWII, and was already a respected officer when he was appointed head of Bomber Command in February 1942. But the Briton quickly became known as a hard man who could strike fear into the toughest men simply by setting his steely gaze upon them.

Harris defended the bombing strategy stoutly and never lost his conviction that he acted properly in carpet-bombing civilians in the war against the Nazis. "I would have destroyed Dresden again", was his cold-blooded answer 30 years later when a journalist asked him if it had been the right choice to bomb the city and kill several thousand civilians.

- **Died aged 91 in 1984.**
- **Memorial statue was raised after his death.**

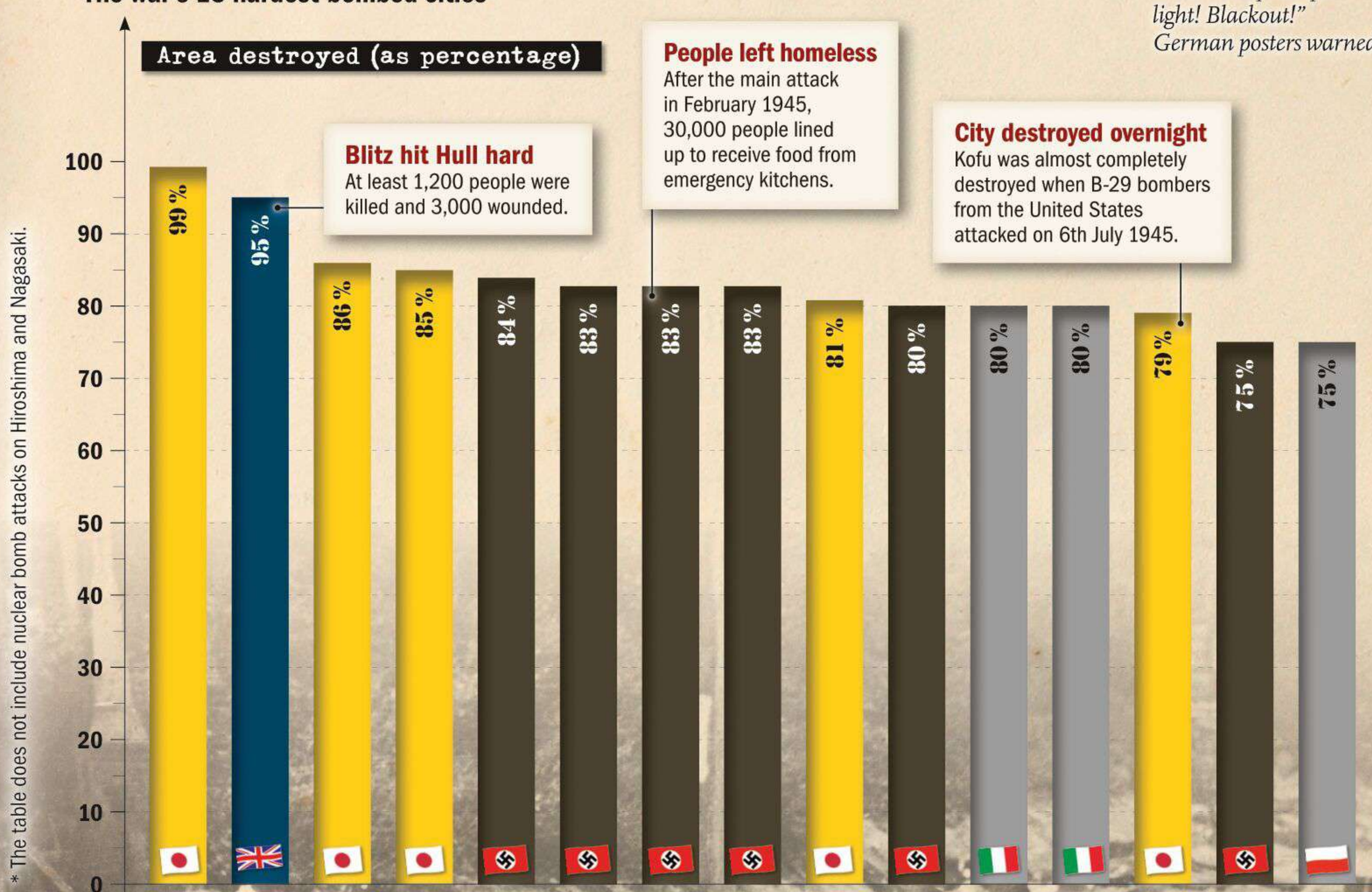
Bombings razed cities to the ground

Concerted air raids had disastrous consequences for those targeted. In the 15 hardest-hit cities, more than 70% of the urban landscape was destroyed and thousands were left homeless. The Allies led the way – 13 of those cities belonged to the Axis powers.



"The enemy sees your light! Blackout!" German posters warned.

*** The war's 15 hardest-bombed cities**



Blitz hit Hull hard
At least 1,200 people were killed and 3,000 wounded.

People left homeless
After the main attack in February 1945, 30,000 people lined up to receive food from emergency kitchens.

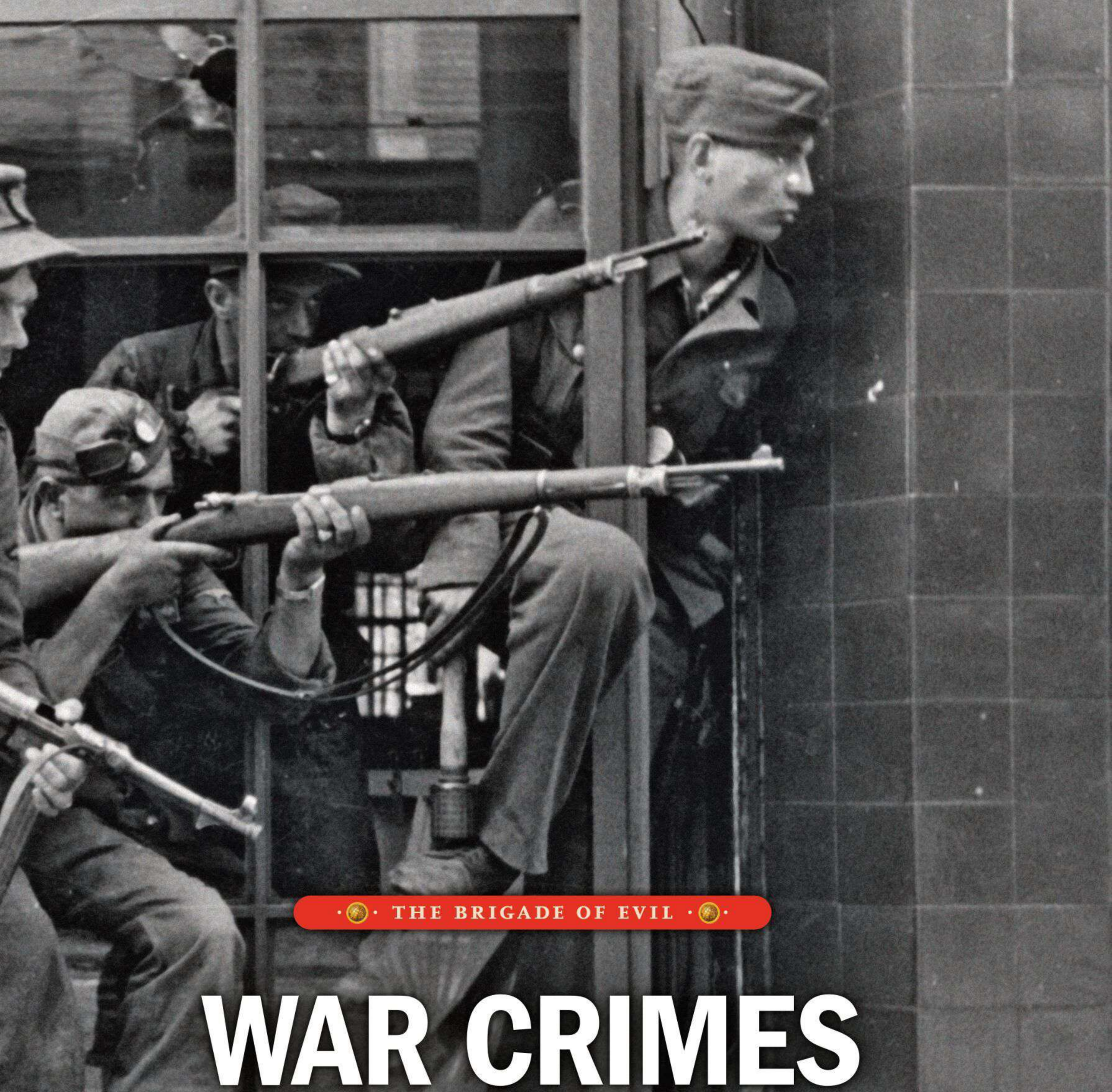
City destroyed overnight
Kofu was almost completely destroyed when B-29 bombers from the United States attacked on 6th July 1945.

More than four thousand were left dead after Bochum was targeted by 150 air raids.

The 1944 Warsaw Uprising was a bonanza of blood for Dirlewanger's troops, who set about murdering the Poles.

1944

AUGUST



THE BRIGADE OF EVIL

WAR CRIMES OF CONVICT UNIT

Poachers, murderers and rapists are put into uniform as SS boss Heinrich Himmler creates a special unit for hardened criminals. Led by a sadistic sex offender, the bloodthirsty brigade is dispatched to bring terror to the occupied lands in the East.

Poland, 1944

THE STAGE IS SET



Germany has subjugated much of Eastern Europe, but pockets of resistance, partisans and rebel groups still remain in the occupied territories. To crush these final opponents, Heinrich Himmler sets up a brigade of convicted felons. But even the feared SS leader has difficulty controlling their criminal rampages.

EVEN THE MOST BATTLE-HARDENED GERMAN soldiers stopped to watch. A new SS unit had just arrived to provide assistance against the partisan uprising, but it was like nothing the veterans had seen before. The newly arrived soldiers – SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger – seemed restless, bore no insignia on their uniforms and reeked of alcohol.

Without missing a beat, the newly arrived soldiers let out a monstrous roar and moved forward under heavy fire from enemy snipers. Dozens crashed to the ground, but the losses had no effect on the brigade, which continued to advance.

The drunken, death-defying battalion fitted perfectly into their chaotic surroundings. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 had just broken out, and Polish Resistance fighters fought from house to house to rid the city of its German occupiers.

Among the amazed soldiers in Warsaw was 18-year-old Mathias Schenk, a German national from Belgium. His army unit had unsuccessfully tried to recapture a street in central

"Why not look for suitable candidates among

Heinrich Himmler offers advice to Oskar Dirlewanger about



Dog tags helped identify fallen SS soldiers.

Warsaw. The Polish Resistance was stubborn, its fighters seemingly invincible until SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger arrived and began its full-frontal assault.

After the brigade's first tank was hit, the SS soldiers forced civilians out of their homes and ordered both women and old people on to the remaining tanks to act as human shields. One woman lost her young daughter when the child was crushed beneath the tank tracks. Immediately an SS soldier shot her in the head to silence her screams. Any civilian who tried to escape was simply shot in the back.

Schenk recounted how he saw a tall, thin man in a black leather jacket standing in the background furiously ordering men forward again and again. The man possessed a thin moustache and a lean, scarred, skull-like face.

In the middle of the fighting, Schenk heard the man in the leather jacket order his men to kill all the Poles – including women and children. Later, Schenk discovered that the man with the emaciated features was Oskar Dirlewanger.

Hitler preferred repeat offenders

The battalion that bore Dirlewanger's name had been set up four years earlier by SS leader Heinrich Himmler and comprised a mixture of violent convicts and unstable soldiers who'd been thrown out of other units. Originally, the idea had been to gather convicted poachers, who could be more use on the front lines than in prison cells.

At first, recruits were carefully selected. Hitler had approved amnesties for poachers, but only those convicted of illegal hunting with firearms – not traps and snares. Moreover, they had to be repeat offenders – the unit

NAME GOTTLOB BERGER

TITLE SS GENERAL

1896-1975

Officer exploited Eastern Europe

Gottlob Berger was responsible for the creation of Oskar Dirlewanger's murderous brigade. He was also responsible for recruiting other units – including the Scandinavian SS divisions.

Berger was a valuable man to the Nazis because of his organisational capabilities. He played an key role in the exploitation of captured areas to the east. After the war, he was sentenced to 25 years at the Nuremberg trials, but was released in 1951.



- **Trained as a teacher when he was young.**
- **Was known as "The Almighty Gottlob".**

the villains?"

finding soldiers among hardened criminals

Suspected partisans were executed without trial. Often, they were shot in the graves they had dug for themselves.

FELON AND SOLDIER

BRIGADE COMMANDER WAS UNREPENTANT CRIMINAL

1895

26TH SEPTEMBER

Oskar Dirlewanger was born in Würzburg in Bavaria.

1913

Dirlewanger joins the army and fights in World War I where he's wounded several times.

1922

The newly formed Nazi party gets a new member: Dirlewanger.



He was one of the Nazi party's first members.

1934

Militant is sentenced to two years in prison for child rape.

1936

Dirlewanger fights in the Spanish Civil War as part of the German Condor Legion. The unit commits various war crimes.

1940

Oskar Dirlewanger is made the commander of a newly formed brigade of convicts. The unit is deployed to the Eastern Front.



The brigade was never large, and there was a rapid turnover of soldiers.

1945

Dirlewanger dies. The events around his death are unclear, but he may have been beaten to death by guards who knew his history.



Oskar Dirlewanger

The commander was promoted several times and also received honours.

wasn't to be staffed by half-hearted amateurs, but men with a proven willingness to kill.

In August 1940, the SS selected 300 poachers who were assembled in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp north of Berlin. Here the men underwent a short training course where they met the unit's new CO, Oskar Dirlewanger.

Ex-con wanted to fight for Germany

Dirlewanger was 44 years old and had a checkered past: he was a doctor in economics and had been highly decorated during World War I. But he was also an alcoholic and a drug addict. Worse, in 1934, he was sentenced for raping a 13-year-old girl and the attempted rape of several other minors. He was stripped of his doctorate and spent two years in prison.

Dirlewanger had already joined Hitler's emerging Nazi party back in 1922, and 10 years later he became a 'Brownshirt' in the SA, the Nazi stormtroopers. But even the SA, which had a reputation for brutality, didn't want to associate with the likes of Dirlewanger. He was expelled from the Party when they learned of his conviction.

After serving his sentence, Dirlewanger travelled to Spain and fought in the German Condor Legion, which sided with Franco in the Spanish Civil War. But his ambition was to serve Germany again. In vain he wrote to Heinrich Himmler and begged to join the SS corps.

Dirlewanger's prayers were finally answered when the new SS unit was set up – thanks to his old friend Gottlob Berger. Dirlewanger and Berger had known each other from their time in a paramilitary right-wing corps that emerged just after World War I. Berger had become a general in the SS and now installed his former comrade as commander of the poachers.

SS knew Dirlewanger terrorised civilians

After training in Sachsenhausen, the brigade was deployed to Poland. Its first stop was on the border with Russia, where the soldiers built fortifications around a Jewish labour camp, near the cities of Krakow and Lublin. It was in the Jewish ghetto in Lublin that Dirlewanger and his poachers first gained notoriety for killing, extorting and robbing civilians.

Dirlewanger would arbitrarily arrest Jews, alleging they had committed a ritualistic murder. Unless they paid a large fine on the spot, they would be shot.

"Dirlewanger was a nuisance and a terror to the entire population. He repeatedly pillaged the ghetto in Lublin, extorting ransoms," stated lawyer Georg Konrad Morgen whom the SS had sent to Poland to investigate a large number of charges filed against Dirlewanger.

The list of crimes turned out to be even more extensive than the lawyer first thought. For example, Morgen discovered that Dirlewanger was carrying out "scientific experiments" on young Jewish women who had been forced to undress before being injected with strychnine.

"Dirlewanger looked on, smoking a cigarette, as did his friends, and they saw how these girls were dying. Immediately after that the corpses were cut into small pieces, mixed with horse meat and boiled into soap," Morgen said after the war.

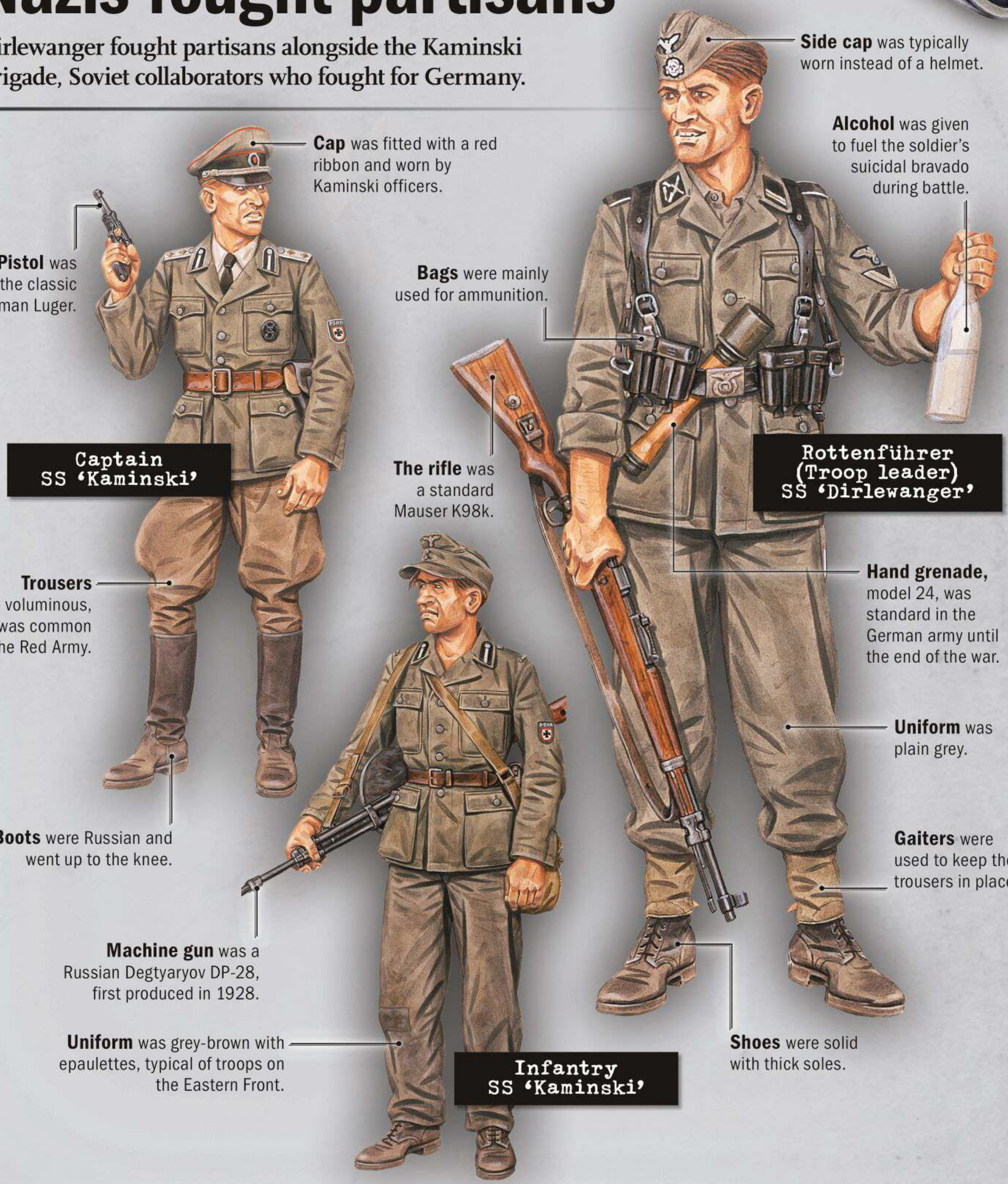
Dirlewanger's behaviour once again proved too much even for the SS. The local Higher SS and Police Leader Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger telephoned SS General Berger at his headquarters in Berlin and told him that unless "this bunch

Criminals and Soviet Nazis fought partisans

Dirlewanger fought partisans alongside the Kaminski Brigade, Soviet collaborators who fought for Germany.

Dirlewanger soldiers wore a ring featuring crossed hand grenades.





of criminals disappears... within a week, I will go myself and lock them up".

If the intention was to stop Dirlewanger's excesses, it didn't work. Berger simply sent the commander further east to the endless Belarusian forests to hunt Russian partisans. Here, Dirlewanger would be beyond the reach of SS investigators and he and his poachers could kill at will.

For two years the SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger rampaged behind the front in Belarus. Part of the poachers' remit was to take out partisans who destroyed German supply lines. And the commander had his own, unorthodox method for snatching them. He would fly over villages that he suspected were sheltering the Resistance fighters in a reconnaissance plane. If anyone fired upon the plane, he would return with his soldiers and burn the village to the ground. No prisoners were ever taken by SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger – men, women and children were all killed. At other times, Dirlewanger collected together women and children

Unit went on a tour of terror

Fighting partisans was brutal because the freedom fighters knew that only death awaited them if captured. The Nazis believed they could only be beaten by units who ignored the rules. Dirlewanger's brigade was formed for the job.

0 50 100 150 200 250 km

RIGA
LATVIA
SOVIET UNION
LITHUANIA
BALTIC SEA
VILNIUS
KÖNIGSBERG
MINSK
BELARUS
BERLIN
GERMANY
WARSAW
LUBLIN
POLAND
KRAKOW
SLOVAKIA
HUNGARY

3. Eastern Front

1943: The brigade is sent to the front and participates in some of the toughest battles. Casualties are high.

4. Warsaw

1944: The brigade is tasked with stopping the Warsaw Uprising. It uses civilians as human shields, then kills many ordinary Poles.



Frightened citizens gathered in regular soldiers' bunkers.

2. Belarus

1942-43: In Belarus, Dirlewanger's criminals are ordered to battle local partisans. The brigade herds entire villages into barns, which are then set alight.

5. Slovakia and Hungary

1944-45: In Hungary and Slovakia, popular uprisings against the Nazi regime break out, but are brutally quashed. The leaders and many unarmed civilians are executed as a lesson to the rest.

1. Poland

1940-42: The brigade serves as an occupying force in Poland and keeps the population in check through daily persecution.



Jews were frequently made to sit on special sections of the trams.

Polish Resistance fighters in Warsaw held out for two months but, in the end, the uprising failed.

and forced them to walk through minefields that had been laid by partisans to protect their positions.

The SS chief made no distinction between civilians and Resistance fighters, and wherever his men appeared, murder, rape and pillage would follow.

During one operation, Dirlewanger's men surrounded a small town and ordered all 2,500 inhabitants – men, women and children – into large barns. Then Dirlewanger came forward and ordered their execution with two simple words: "Shoot immediately!" The door of the first barn was opened and the soldiers emptied their machine gun magazines into the crowd. Once empty, the men loaded new magazines and fired until the barn was eventually set alight.

In Germany, the Nazi leadership did nothing to curb the brigade's barbarous activities, which according to some historians cost at least 120,000 Belarusians their lives. On the contrary, Adolf Hitler issued a decree in January 1943 stating that German soldiers could not be prosecuted for acts committed during anti-partisan operations. Dirlewanger had officially been given free rein.

Complaints fell on deaf ears

Despite the brigade receiving Hitler's blessing, complaints about Dirlewanger continued to be logged. In May 1943, the brigade participated in a large-scale operation targeting partisans. Official records put the partisan losses at around 9,800 lives, and again Dirlewanger's men were responsible for a catalogue of sadistic actions. When a German propaganda officer travelled around the area after the fighting, he reported that some partisans had been burned alive, while others had been killed by wild pigs. Wilhelm Kube, who was Commissioner General of Belarus, protested, but Dirlewanger's guardian angel, Berger, intervened again, dismissing the criticism as nonsense and stating that Dirlewanger was quite restrained in the circumstances.

By June 1943 Dirlewanger had 760 men under him, but the brigade constantly required new blood. Casualties were significantly higher than in other SS units – hence their nickname: "the Ascension Commandos".

Germany was beginning to run out of suitable poachers, which meant that the recruitment base had to be expanded. Dirlewanger started taking court-martialed SS troops, Russian deserters and a variety of convicted criminals into his depleted ranks.

In February 1944, Heinrich Himmler granted Dirlewanger permission to handpick up to 800 men from the "antisocials and the career criminals" who'd been interned in German concentration camps. The battalion's new recruits now included murderers, rapists, child abusers as well as the criminally insane.

With a certain amount of pride, Himmler mentioned Dirlewanger and his soldiers in a speech

1899-1944

NAME **BRONISLAV KAMINSKI**

TITLE COMMANDER

Leader changed sides

The Kaminski Brigade competed with Dirlewanger's men in the brutality stakes. It was headed by Bronislav Kaminski, a former Red Army soldier who chose to collaborate with the Nazis after being captured.

The Kaminski Brigade also participated in crushing the Warsaw Uprising, but the brigade was so barbarous that the unit was dissolved and Kaminski executed.



- **Was born in Russia.**
- **Was shot after being court-martialed.**

"The atmosphere in the regiment is often medieval in the use of corporal punishment"

Heinrich Himmler discusses the discipline of Dirlewanger's men

The soldiers were equipped with simple small arms, which proved highly effective in urban combat.



A Romany camp in Slovakia was torn apart by Dirlewanger's brigade during its fight against a popular uprising, which started in August 1944. Despite Dirlewanger's efforts, isolated units across Europe continued to fight the occupying forces until the end of the war.

to local Nazis in Poland in 1944: "I said to Dirlewanger, 'Now, why not look for suitable candidates among the villains, the real criminals, in the concentration camps?'"

Himmler placed particular emphasis on the brigade's discipline: "The atmosphere in the regiment is often somewhat medieval in the use of corporal punishment... If someone pulls a face when asked whether we will win the war or not, he will slump down... dead, because the others will have shot him out of hand".

No form of disobedience was tolerated inside the unit. Rule breakers were usually punished by being beaten with clubs or might even be shot. One particularly feared punishment was the so-called Dirlewanger coffin. Wrongdoers were forced to stand upright in a cramped, closed box for days. According to the soldiers, the confined soldier either died or came out a merciless killer.

The harsh penalties were designed to force the soldiers to show blind obedience and suicidal bravado at all times. In December 1943, Dirlewanger even issued an order that cowardice in battle would be punished by death.



Actions against partisans were noted in the service records of Dirlewanger brigade soldiers.

Brutality continued in Poland

During the uprising in Warsaw in 1944, 18-year-old Mathias Schenk saw the brigade's alcohol-infused fearlessness at first hand. The unit had been withdrawn from Belarus after the Red Army had recaptured the territory and were instead deployed to Warsaw. The soldiers' attitude remained the same despite the change in scenery: fierce and blood-thirsty.

During the first week of the Warsaw Uprising, Germans killed between 40,000 and 50,000 Poles – most of them in

"Doctor Dirlewanger was hardly a good boy... But he was a good soldier"

SS General Gottlob Berger, defended Dirlewanger's record at the Nuremberg trials

the Wola district where Dirlewanger's men roamed. With no regard for their victims' age or gender, the men murdered and raped their way through Warsaw's old town where – according to eyewitness reports – the brigade set fire to its prisoners of war, impaled infants on bayonets and strung up women from the buildings' balconies.

After a few days of fighting, Schenk came under Dirlewanger's command. Here, with his fellow soldiers, he learned to drink vodka on an empty stomach every morning, so he was suitably anaesthetised before the fighting began.

Out in the field, Schenk was placed in the front line where he had to blast doors and remove obstacles so Dirlewanger's men could move in.

One day the soldiers forced their way into a room where wounded Poles and Germans lay side by side, cared for by a single doctor and 15 nurses. The wounded Germans begged the SS soldiers to spare the Poles, but their pleas fell on deaf ears, and the Poles had their heads smashed in with rifle butts. The battalion then stripped the nurses.

That evening, Schenk watched the naked and battered nurses being led to a gallows, which had been set up in an open space. The nurses' hands were over their heads and blood was running down their legs. Dirlewanger grinned as he kicked the bricks from under one of the nurses.

After two months, the uprising in Warsaw had been crushed. 200,000 Poles had died, while SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger had lost just 2,700 men – the majority of those being new recruits from an SS penal camp that had been set up during the uprising.

Schenk had seen enough. In the winter of 1944-45 he deserted. Helped by Polish peasants, he hid in a horse stable until the war was over.

"Why did they save me? I have never learned why. Out of mercy, probably. I looked like a beaten kid," he recounted many years later.

Dirlewanger tried to hide

After Warsaw, Dirlewanger's troops moved to Slovakia to suppress another uprising. In the spring of 1945, the unit was transferred to Germany, where it fought its last battle against the advancing Russians on the outskirts of Berlin.

After Germany surrendered, Dirlewanger took a false name and tried to hide himself by pretending to be a simple civilian. It didn't work: in June 1945, the sadistic commander was arrested in southern Germany. He was taken into custody by French forces, but his guard detail was made up of Poles.

How much those guards knew about Oskar Dirlewanger's history and crimes is uncertain, but according to a fellow inmate, the Poles beat the German so thoroughly that by the morning of 5th June 1945 he was no longer able to speak or move. Dirlewanger was pronounced dead two days later.

His former guardian angel, Gottlob Berger, was also arrested following the war. During the Nuremberg trials, Berger was asked about his old friend's atrocities: "Doctor Dirlewanger was hardly a good boy... But he was a good soldier," an unrepentant Berger replied.

Schenk returned to Belgium, where he started a family and had four children. He never forgot his experiences in Poland. After the war, he organised emergency aid to the country and met with veterans from the uprising in Warsaw.

PERSPECTIVE

Massacres were intended to cow resistance

The SS slaughtered both captured soldiers and civilians in occupied areas. The Nazis wanted revenge and to deter the population from rebellion.

VILLAGE WAS WIPED OUT In 1942, Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich was killed by the Czech Resistance. According to a false rumour, the perpetrators were from the village of **Lidice**. Days later, the Nazis burnt it down, shot all the men, sent the women sent to Ravensbrück camp and had most of the children gassed.

173 died

CHILDREN WERE KILLED TOO On 29th September 1944 SS Major Walter Reder led his soldiers into **Marzabotto** near Bologna. It was rumoured to be a hot spot of resistance, but that was about to end. Over the following days, the inhabitants were systematically executed. 110 of the victims were under ten.

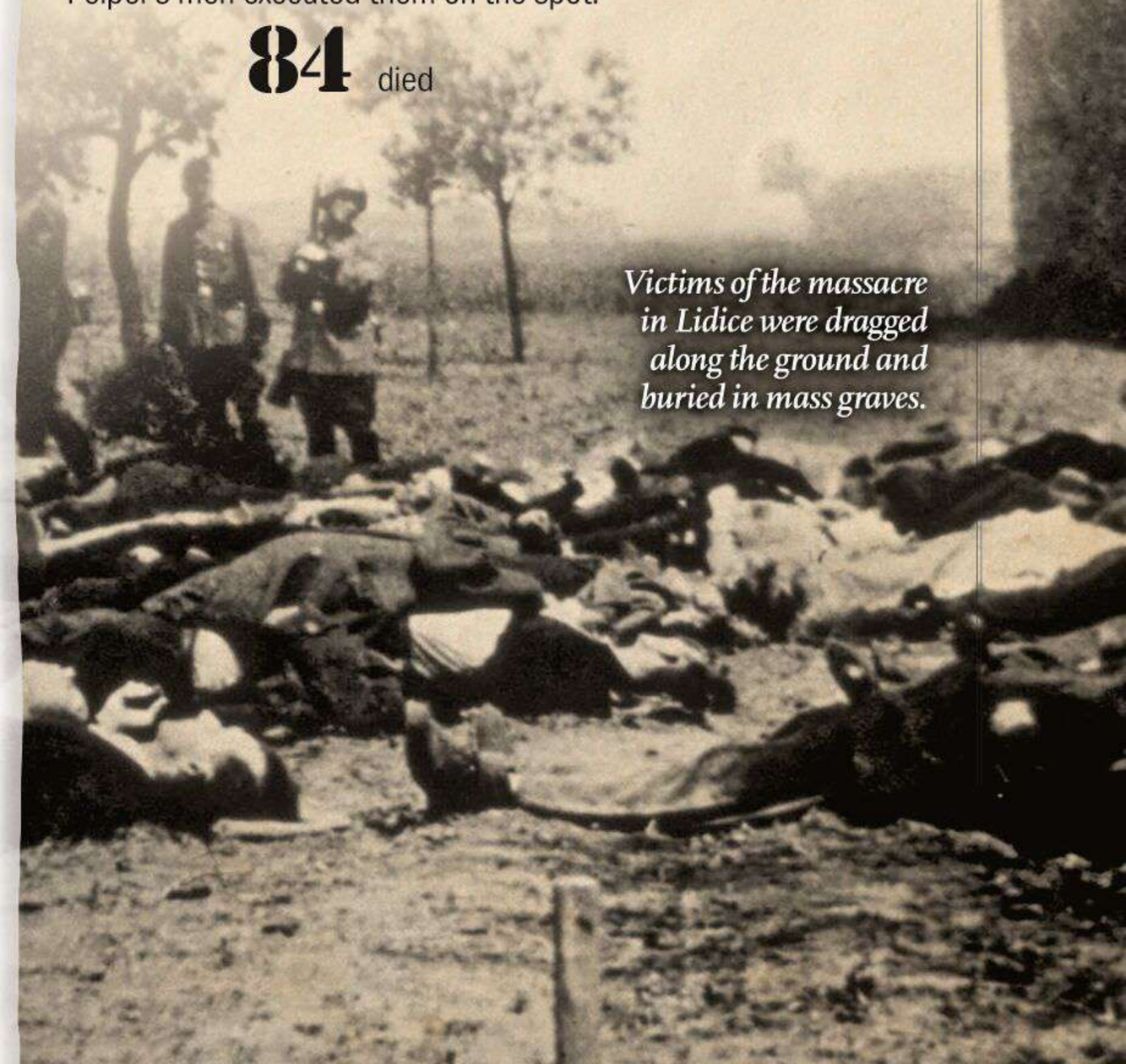
770 died

BURNED ALIVE In June 1944, the SS heard that an officer had been captured near **Oradour-sur-Glane**. Shortly afterwards, an SS unit went to the town. The troops shot all the men, then locked the women and children in the church and set it on fire.

642 died

SOLDIERS WERE EXECUTED A German armoured unit led by Joachim Peiper advanced to **Malmedy** in Belgium in December 1944. Instead of taking their American prisoners to camps, Peiper's men executed them on the spot.

84 died



Victims of the massacre in Lidice were dragged along the ground and buried in mass graves.

Hitler's female killers

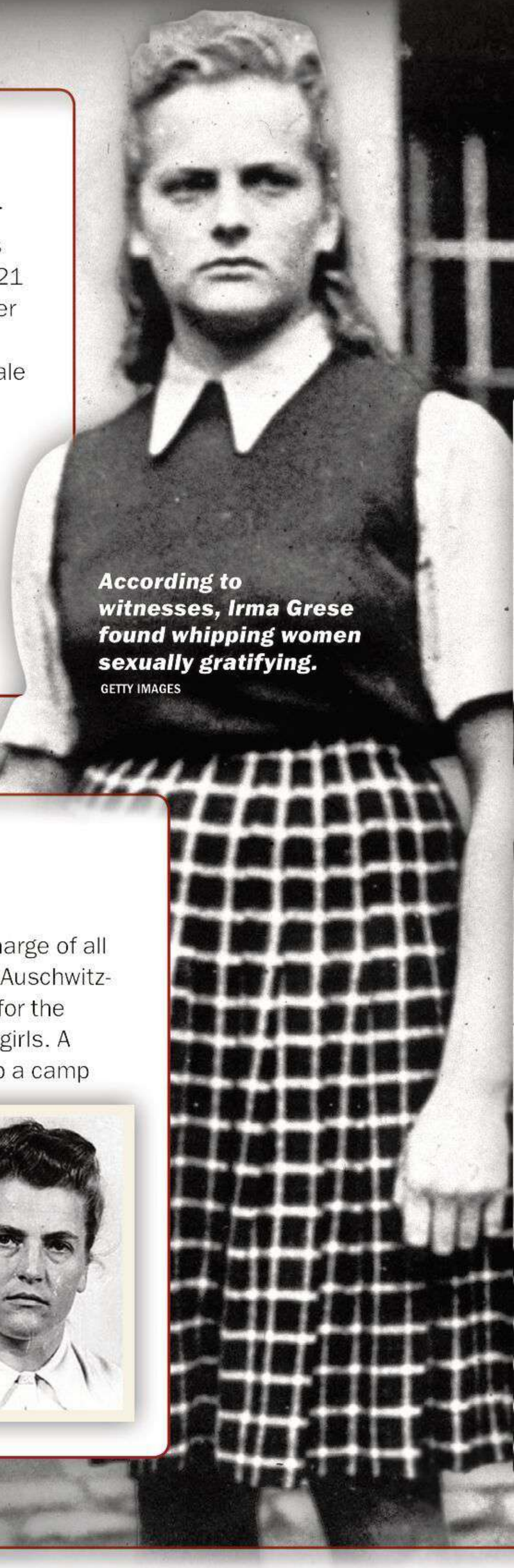
BY ESBEN SYLVEST

At least 21 women were hanged after World War II for atrocities committed in Nazi concentration camps. The worst female guards were as bad as their male counterparts: they sent children to be gassed, chopped apart inmates with axes and shovels, and executed prisoners on a whim. Some even achieved sexual gratification by torturing those sent to the camps. A total of 55,000 people served as guards in the concentration camps. Of those, 3,700 were women.

THE YOUNG EXECUTIONER

Irma Grese, who was known as "the beautiful beast", was only 21 at the end of the war. Despite her age, she held a high rank at Auschwitz and had 30,000 female prisoners under her control. Wearing heavy black boots and armed with a whip and gun, she ruled with an iron fist. Grese arbitrarily shot prisoners or beat them to death.

Camps: Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz.
Fate: Hanged in 1945.



According to witnesses, Irma Grese found whipping women sexually gratifying.
GETTY IMAGES

THE MUSICAL MURDERESS

In 1942, **Maria Mandel** took charge of all female prisoners and guards at Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was responsible for the deaths of 500,000 women and girls. A classical music lover, she set up a camp orchestra that played during roll calls, executions and selections.

Camps: Lichtenberg, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau.
Fate: Hanged in 1948.



PAST CAUGHT UP WITH SADISTIC GUARD

Hermine Braunsteiner, known as the "stomping mare", built up a grim reputation at Majdanek camp after she stamped on a prisoner until she died. She also whipped others to death. After the war, she served a short sentence, but avoided prosecution for her worst crimes. On release, she moved to the US and became a housewife in New York. Her past caught up with her, however, when surviving prisoners told Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal about her crimes. His staff traced her and she was extradited in 1973 for a new trial in Germany.

Camps: Ravensbrück, Majdanek.
Fate: Life sentence. Died in 1999, shortly after being released.

ROMANTIC KILLER



A nervous silence descended wherever **Dorothea Binz** went. Prisoners who so much as looked at her risked being shot or beaten to death. Binz's boyfriend at Ravensbrück was an SS officer in the camp, and the couple reportedly took regular romantic walks around the encampment. According to witnesses, they would often stop to watch women being flogged, then stroll on again, laughing. One report even claimed that Binz once used an axe to kill a prisoner during a forced labour assignment.

Camps: Ravensbrück.
Fate: Hanged in 1947.

HUMAN-SKIN LAMPSHADES

Ilse Koch – "the witch of Buchenwald" – whipped prisoners at will. She was married to camp commandant Karl Koch and allegedly owned a lampshade made from tattooed human skin. Witnesses claim that the skin came from prisoners with tattoos Koch admired. These inmates were then executed and skinned. Koch also enjoyed selecting prisoners who she forced to have sex while she watched. Just before the end of the war, her husband was executed for embezzlement. Koch herself was acquitted due to lack of evidence.

Camps: Buchenwald, Majdanek.
Fate: Life sentence. Committed suicide in 1967.

Ilse Koch forced prisoners to rape one another while she watched.



RUTHLESSLY EFFICIENT

Ruth Neudeck was born in 1920 in the Nazi stronghold of Breslau. As an SS guard, her career advanced rapidly because of her efficiency. She soon became the head guard at Uckermark camp, where she sent thousands of women and children to be gassed. Unlike most guards, Neudeck confessed to all her crimes. In court, she claimed there had been 4,000 prisoners in the Uckermark camp when she arrived. Six weeks later, only 1,000 remained. One prisoner claimed that she saw Neudeck "cut the throat of an inmate with the sharp edge of her shovel".



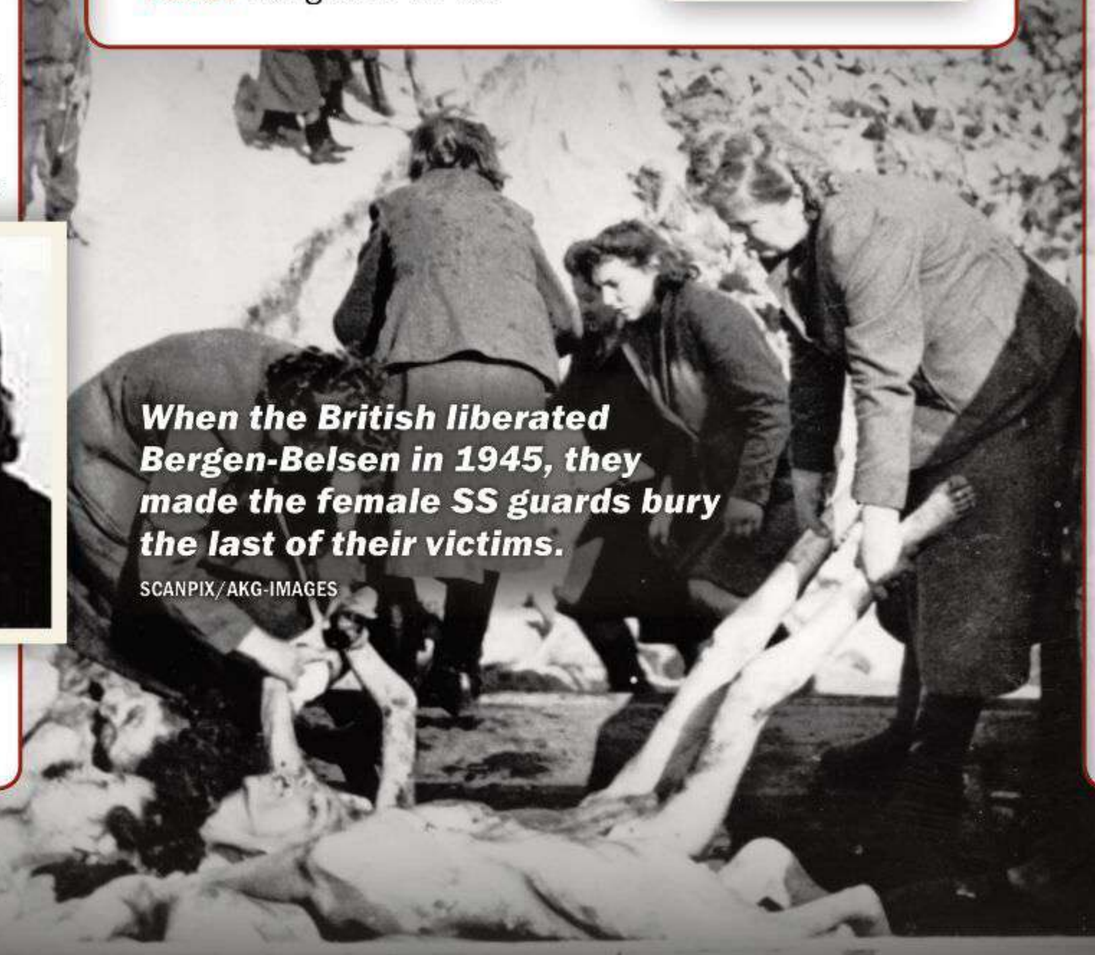
Camps: Ravensbrück, Uckermack.
Fate: Hanged in 1948.

UNLEASHED DOGS

Juana Bormann became known as "the woman with the dogs" at Lichtenberg camp, because she regularly set her hounds on the prisoners. Bormann was just over 150 cm tall – but she still managed to beat inmates by using a stick.



Camps: Lichtenberg, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen.
Fate: Hanged in 1945.



When the British liberated Bergen-Belsen in 1945, they made the female SS guards bury the last of their victims.

SCANPIX/AKG-IMAGES

USED ICED WATER

Ewa Paradies became notorious in the last months of the war at the Stutthof camp in Poland. The prison was located near her birthplace of Lauenberg, where she was arrested in May 1945. She was tried for a number of war crimes, including murder. One witness described how Paradies forced female prisoners to strip off their clothes in the snow, after which she poured ice-cold water on them. Those who moved were beaten. Paradies (pictured with a noose around her neck) was hung near Danzig in front of thousands of spectators.

Camps: Stutthof.
Fate: Hanged in 1946.

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WWII'S DARKEST CRIMES

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“Local Thais told us that the officers had been bayoneted”

These words belong to Lieutenant Colonel Philip Toosey and describe the fate of two British officers who had tried to flee a Japanese forced labour camp. Like Toosey himself, the two officers had been captured after the fall of Singapore. Starved and beaten, they were being forced to build an ‘impossible’ railway through Thailand’s jungles. Prisoners of war fared little better under the Nazis and Soviets, who both routinely violated Geneva Convention rules. In Germany, ‘undesirable’ people were slaughtered with ruthless efficiency, with up to six million Jews being gassed in Nazi concentration camps. Others were worked to death or became subjects of twisted medical experiments. This issue focuses on the worst atrocities of World War II to reveal the heinous crimes we must never forget...



History

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